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Uncertainty And Frustration In Gaming

ANDREW REINER
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
reiner@gameinformer.com

Follow me on Twitter
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Imagine going to a see new Star Wars movie only to learn the special effects haven't been added yet. When movies open in theaters, they light up the silver screen as finished products, receiving the proper editing and polish to please both the director and audience. I'm old enough to remember when games also were released as finished products. As silly as this comment sounds, it highlights one of the worst trends in gaming today: developers and publishers relying heavily on patches to hit release dates.

We may not even be able to call this a "trend" anymore. Day-one patches have become common practice – just another step in making a game. In most cases, this patch gives developers extra time to polish a game after it goes gold. That's a good thing if polish is the intent, but I don't think it always is. Cyberpunk 2077 for PlayStation 4 and Xbox One clearly wasn't finished by the time it went gold and was sent off for manufacturing. Given the game's performance issues at launch, I doubt these versions of Cyberpunk 2077 are anywhere close to what we the players (or even CD Projekt Red) would consider finished.

We live in a world of alphas and betas, but when we pay full price for a game (physical or digital), we expect to get a complete product. The fallout from this botched release will likely be extensive. Patches have already left people wary of buying games at launch, and because of Cyberpunk 2077, that fear may now be amplified. To combat this thinking, companies across the board need to release more finished products. More testing and polishing needs to happen prior to going gold. Nintendo has a tremendous track record of releasing highly polished games, and while I know it's not often the developers' choice when to launch a game, I hope we see more decision-makers at companies take a good, hard look at the quality of their upcoming projects before building out a marketing schedule for them. Let's get back to the days of games being finished when they launch.

Be safe. Be happy. And game on!

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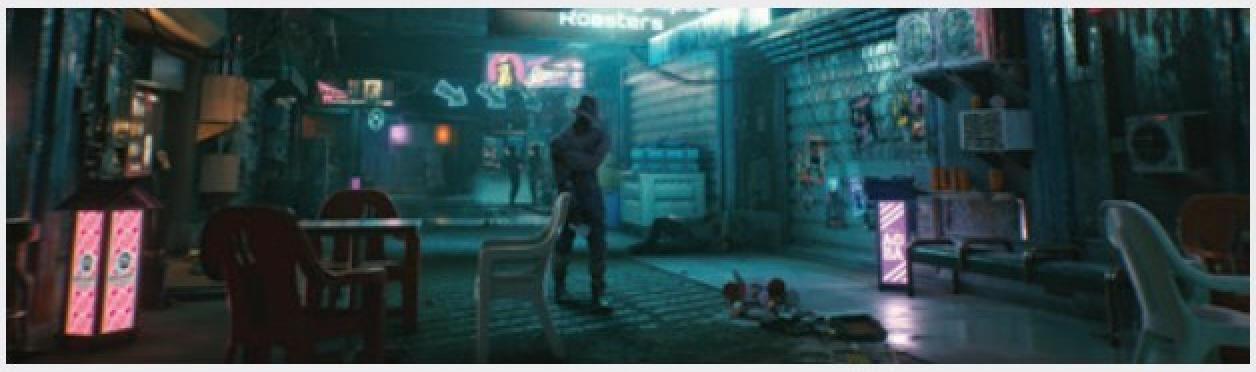
Mass Effect Legendary Edition

We spent in-depth time talking to BioWare about its upcoming Mass Effect trilogy remasters, learning about the enhancements and unexpected challenges of the project, and why the stars finally aligned to bring the series to 4K. We also got the scoop on why the first Mass Effect received the biggest quality-of-life changes and improvements. ***by Kimberley Wallace***



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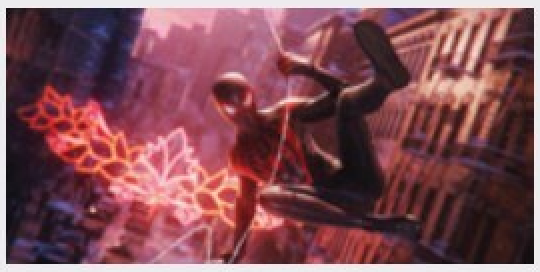

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IO Interactive finally put a bow on the World of Assassination trilogy it began in 2016. Agent 47's bloody conclusion is as satisfying as ever.

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Bloober Team's reality-warping adventure is finally here, and while it swings big with the power of the Xbox Series X/S, does it stick the landing?

79 Cyber Shadow
Cyber Shadow harkens back to the era of ultra-difficult games like Ninja Gaiden, but is it more frustrating than fun?

80 Call Of The Sea
Take a trip to a beautiful, puzzle-filled island as you try and uncover the mysteries of your missing husband.

81 Super Meat Boy Forever
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They look ferocious, but inside they're just chicken raised with no antibiotics ever.
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feedback

This month our readers discuss Cyberpunk 2077's rocky launch, Lucasfilm Games snatching up key developers, and weigh in on our Games of 2020 lists …

Hitman 3

I was happy to see Agent 47's face greet me when I opened my mailbox. Hitman is my favorite gaming series, and I can't wait to get my hands on the newest version, which is sadly being billed as an ending for the "World of Assassination" trilogy. Do you think Hitman will continue in the future as a new series, or is [IO Interactive] only going to make James Bond games moving forward?

Sidney Rougeron
Madison, WI

I've never been a big fan of stealth games and have always avoided the Hitman series because it looks like it is all about sneaking around and waiting for enemies to turn their backs to you. After reading last month's story, I realized it's much more than that. I was intrigued by the player freedom, creativity of the assassinations, locations you travel to, and even the story that sets it all up. It made me pick up the first game in the new trilogy, which I couldn't put down. I'm now working my way through the second one, and can't wait for the game you put on *Game Informer*'s cover. Goes to show you that you shouldn't write stuff off immediately.

Scott Meyer
via email

IO Interactive is such a great success story as a developer that became its own publisher. We're seeing the same thing happen with Bungie and Destiny. From what I read, it sounds like the development team is having a lot of fun making this series without a publisher lording over their creative efforts. I'm looking forward to seeing if the game feels different because of this. Also, I need to know what celebrities we'll be seeing in this game. Gary Busey and Sean Bean's Elusive Targets were awesome!

Wilfried Mbappé
Tybee Island, GA

IO Interactive securing the rights to create James Bond video games likely won't stop the studio from making more games in the Hitman series. If Hitman 3 is a success, why not make more? With the World of Assassination trilogy coming to an end, what comes next could be quite different and give the chance for a new start. As for the celebrity we'd like to see as an Elusive Target, the only answer is the Hollywood version of Agent 47, Timothy Olyphant.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Cyberpunk 2077 Reactions

I had to mute social media for a couple of weeks when Cyberpunk 2077 came out. Following the glowing reviews (including your 9 out of 10, *Game Informer*), all I saw was negativity. People hate the game, wanted their money back, and I couldn't understand why. I, too, picked up Cyberpunk 2077 on release day and played it for 10 hours straight. I adored it then and do now. People were saying it was only good on PC, but my time with it was on Xbox Series S, and I thought it was great. Do people just have higher expectations than in the past, or is the game that broken and I just lucked out in my playthrough?

Susanne Broker
Ontario, Canada

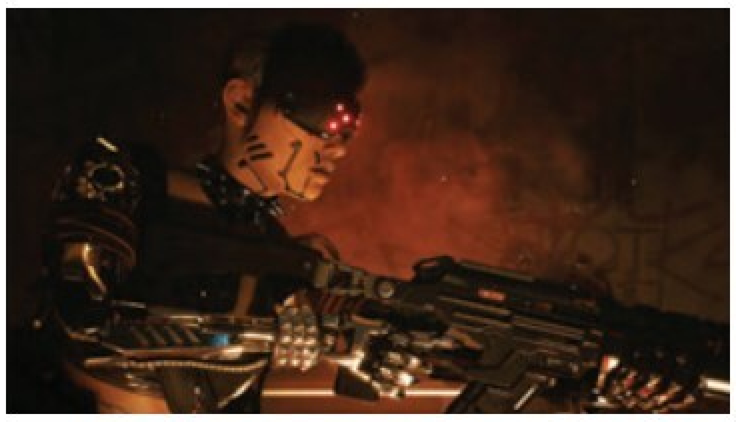
Cyberpunk 2077 is the most broken, unplayable, wildly unfinished game I have ever played, and it's pretty darn fun to boot! I think the game is fine as-is. It should have been delayed to take care of some of the wonkiness, but it's still an awesome game even when it breaks. Just my two cents, *GI*.

T. Hommes
via email

I got my COVID-19 vaccine, and I still don't like Cyberpunk 2077. Not sure what is up with that game. It looked great in the videos and sounded amazing from what y'all wrote. What I played isn't anything like those things. That's $60 down the toilet for me.

Amanda Rice-Whitney
San Francisco, CA

Everyone has a different take on Cyberpunk 2077. *Game Informer*'s editor-in-chief Andrew Reiner gave the PC version a 9 out of 10 review, whereas associate editor Jason Guisao gave the Xbox One version a 5.5 out of 10. We're seeing a huge gulf in quality between the two versions. Years ago, CD Projekt Red patched The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt numerous times in its first year of release. Cyberpunk 2077, while worse off on day one, is currently receiving the same treatment, and will hopefully be patched up and better for the wear in the months ahead. What we really want to know is if the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One versions can be fixed to the point of looking like the game CD Projekt Red originally advertised.



Game Of The Year

I thoroughly enjoyed your Games of the Year coverage for 2020, and fully expected The Last of Us Part II to walk away with top honors. I didn't expect the Top 10 list to hold many surprises, but it did with Immortals Fenyx Rising and Yakuza: Like a Dragon edging out other flagship games. A couple of games I would have fought for are: Going Under, Maid of Sker, and Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot.

Devin Sherrill
via email

You jumped the shark with your awards, *Game Informer*! Maneater should have been on the Top 10! It was one of the most uniquely refreshing games of the year.

Marcus Benintendi
France

Everyone has different tastes in gaming, and our best-of-the-year list speaks to the *Game Informer* staff's top picks. Along with our ordered Top 10, we did our best to bring out personal picks for each staffer, and also awarded games that excelled in particular ways. We celebrated nearly 50 games in total, yet there were many more that were brought up in our discussions. We lived through a difficult year, but games continued to shine bright.

Trophy Problems

First time commenter, longtime *GI* reader, and huge fan. I wanted to comment and rant about the trophy system for [PlayStation]. Maybe you guys can shine a light or help put things into perspective (or just listen to me be upset). I have written actual letters to their customer-service people to have them get rid of some trophies (that honestly weren't even from me playing) and no luck! They really don't care, and that list of incomplete games is irritating me. It is very disheartening to see a game on my list as 1 percent or 2 percent complete, and having Sony not have any urgency to help me out. Some of the games are so old that even if I tried playing them, the multiplayer trophies would be virtually impossible to achieve considering the servers are empty or in some cases shut down. Big sigh! My OCD with this incomplete list is killing me.

Junior Gomes
Framingham, MA

Trophy and Achievement lists double as timelines that show what games you've played. Even booting up a free PlayStation Plus game for a few seconds shows that you played it. We like your idea of being able to remove them, or at the very least be able to hide them from your viewable history if you want to show people the games that you *really* played. Make it so, Sony and Microsoft.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"With games like Stream Raiders and Twitch's [Marbles on Stream] growing popularity, do you think there is a new type of gamer even more abstract than the mobile-only gamer? Are we heading towards a world where everyone is a gamer, and it's just a matter of personal entry point and style preferences?"

We're already in that world where everyone is a gamer, and you are right – it's more about what kind of gamer you are and what experiences you seek out. Viewer-centric games like the ones mentioned where chat interacts with a streamer are absolutely a growing field, and we expect them to become even more involved and robust games in the future.

"Prediction time, Game Informer: After Sephiroth, who will the next Smash Bros. combatant be?"

We're going with Master Chief and then Crash Bandicoot, in that order.

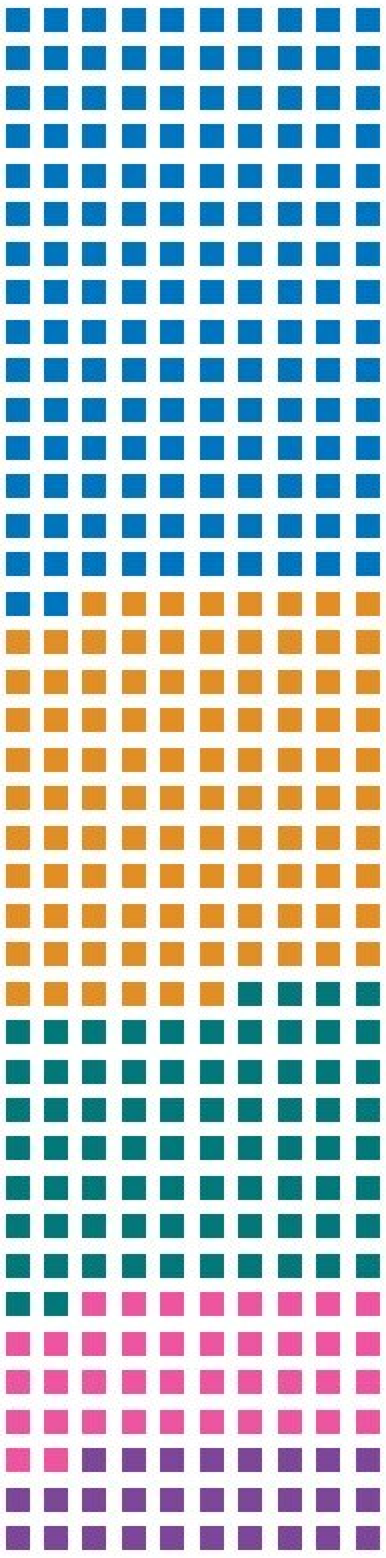
"Does Nintendo need to make a new machine to keep up with Sony and Microsoft?"

No. Switch is a monster of a success outside of anything that's happening with PlayStation and Xbox. It would be nice to have a more powerful Switch, but it isn't needed. As long as the games keep coming, Switch has plenty of life left in it.

Best Comment:

"I got 11k on TikTok I can do an ad if you pay me."

On Your Mind



- 🟦 Already want 2021 to be over
- 🟧 Are happy with their next-gen console purchases
- 🟩 Still aren't fast enough to get consoles when they appear in stores
- 🟥 Want to check out Super Nintendo World
- 🟪 Think Nintendo is making a high-end Switch

Question Of The Month:

Are you happy with your new-generation console purchases?

Lucasfilm Games

I'm excited for the new Indiana Jones and Star Wars games that are coming, but at what cost? Does this mean Machine Games won't be making another Wolfenstein? Will Massive Entertainment not make The Division 3? Top developers are getting put on licenses and are not giving us fresh ideas. I'm concerned the same thing that happened with movies of everything being a superhero or sci-fi flick is starting to happen to games.

Dave Moore
Orlando, FL

We agree with your assessment of losing big teams to licenses, but it isn't in excess yet, and we don't know the specifics of which teams are working on the projects. Sometimes studios will create a new team to tackle a new project. We'll have to wait for more details, but we're excited by the prospects of more publishers outside of Electronic Arts getting a crack at Lucasfilm's awesome properties.

Delays

The pandemic continues pushing back movies and fan conventions and I'm wondering what kind of effect it is having on games. Cyberpunk 2077 was delayed numerous times, but the PS5 and Xbox Series X came out on time, and so did most other games. Will 2021 be business as usual or will we see less stuff? Not being able to go see movies last year was a huge part of my life that vanished. Losing more new games would make this pandemic even more challenging for me.

Billy Waters
via email

The pandemic has had a huge impact on game development, and 2020 and 2021's release schedules are much lighter than originally intended. We have talked to numerous developers and publishers about the pandemic and the struggles to make games remotely. Some studios have found viable solutions to continue making progress at a comfortable speed, while others haven't had that luxury. As one example, Arkane Studios delayed Deathloop from PS5's launch to May 21. What we're seeing now are fewer release dates being locked in. There will be many more releases hitting in 2021 than have been announced now, but the landing dates remain in flux.

Reader Responses

Last month we asked our readers what living game they return to the most. Here are the games that have captured their imaginations…

The living game I keep returning to time and again is Sea of Thieves. The amount of work Rare has done, the vast amount of change the game has seen is astounding! I'm very much a "don't shoot until shot upon" kind of pirate, so having SO much to do that isn't just attacking other pirates has been a blast. I'm beyond excited for the addition of seasons to the game!

Steve S.
via email

I revisit Diablo III the most out of any "living" game. Whether it's turning a friend on to the genre for the first time or just cruising through the latest season, the carrot on a stick of ever-improving gear is always a blast to play through again.

Tom Petersen
Tennessee

I've bounced off of many live games before, but one that keeps calling my name is Destiny 2. Yes, it has its fair share of problems (due to its looter-shooter nature) but you can't deny how far Bungie has come with that game's mechanics, world building, and gunplay.

Eli Medina
Raleigh, NC

WINNER

1 Kimmy Arts

Nessa is always prepared to fight for Hulbury's Gym and battle anyone brave enough to try to earn their water badge.

2 Megan Leleniewski

Take a break from all your hard work, Tom Nook. By all means. You've really earned it.

3 Yuna Krajewski

Quick bit of advice, Mario: Don't spend too much money buying Papyrus dinner, since food goes right through him.

4 Catie Raciti

HONK! HONK! (That's "Nice work" in goose.)

5 Noah Lee, Age 5

If there's any doubt about Link's Awakening being among the best Zelda games, here's proof: It inspires five-year-olds to draw amazing pictures like this.

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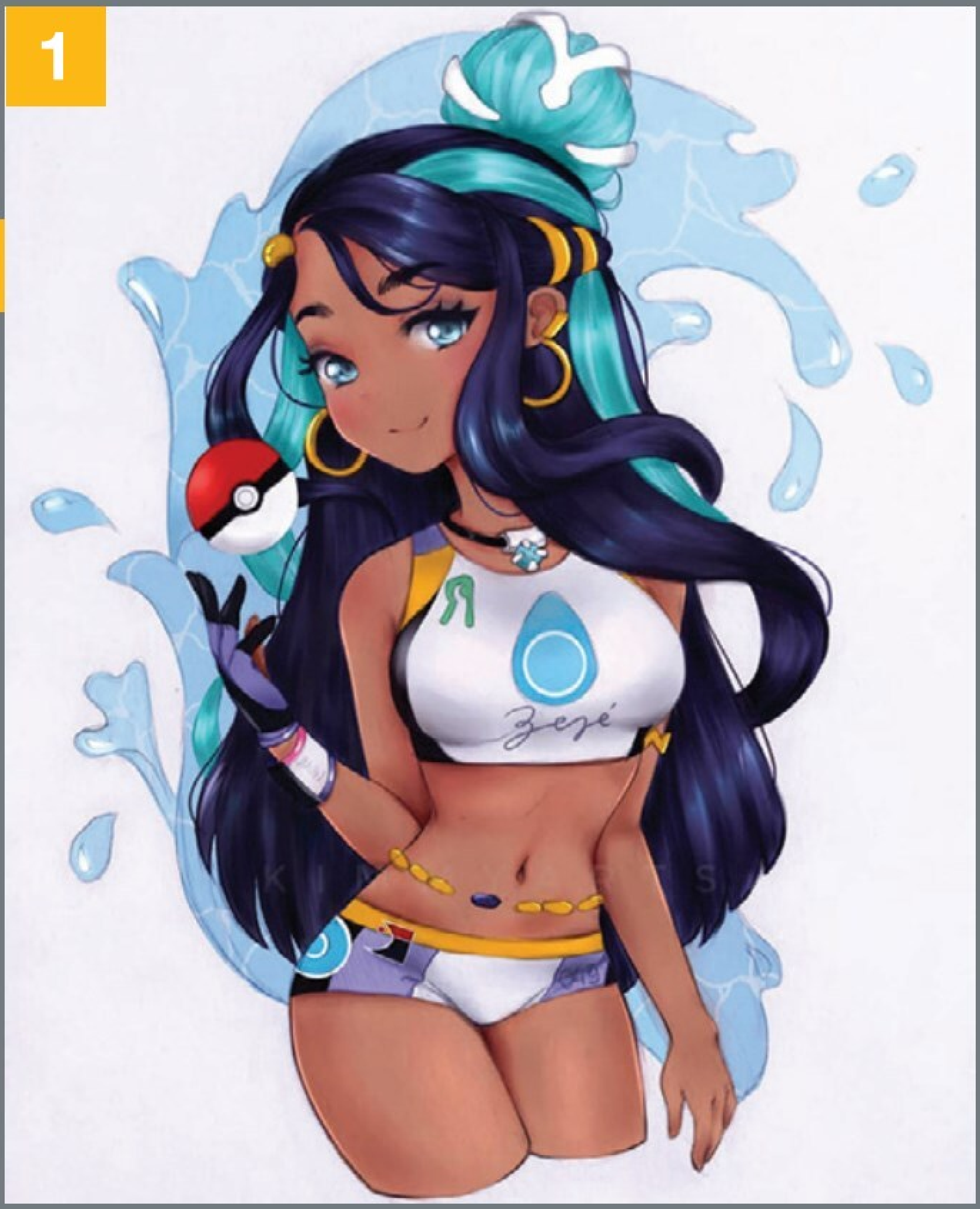

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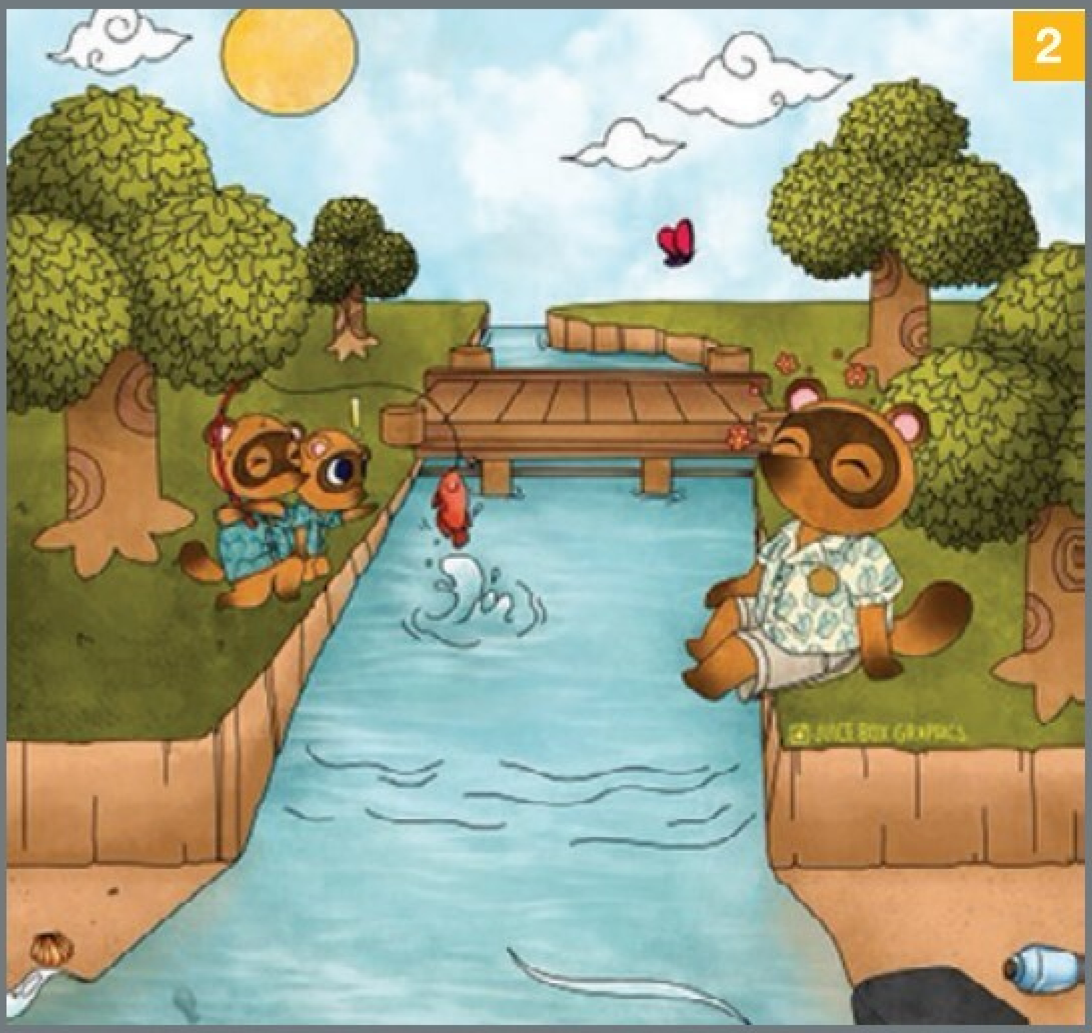

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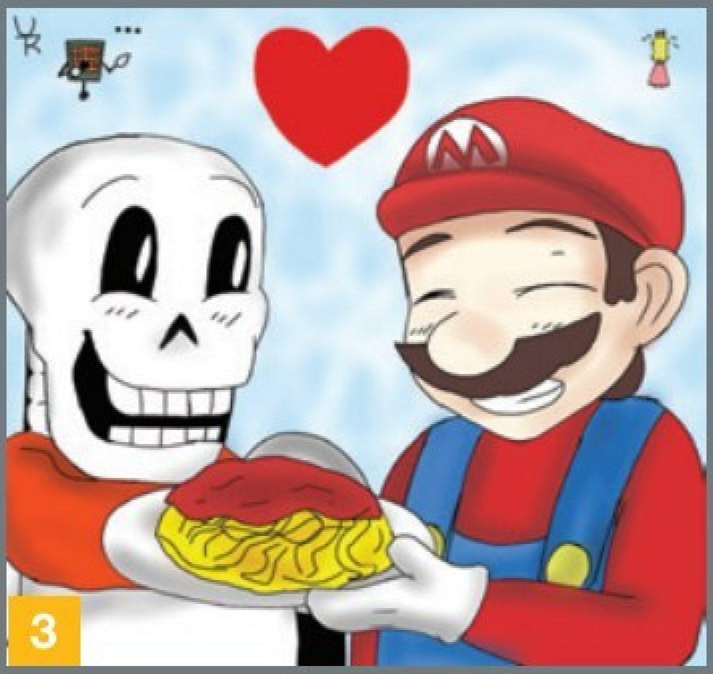

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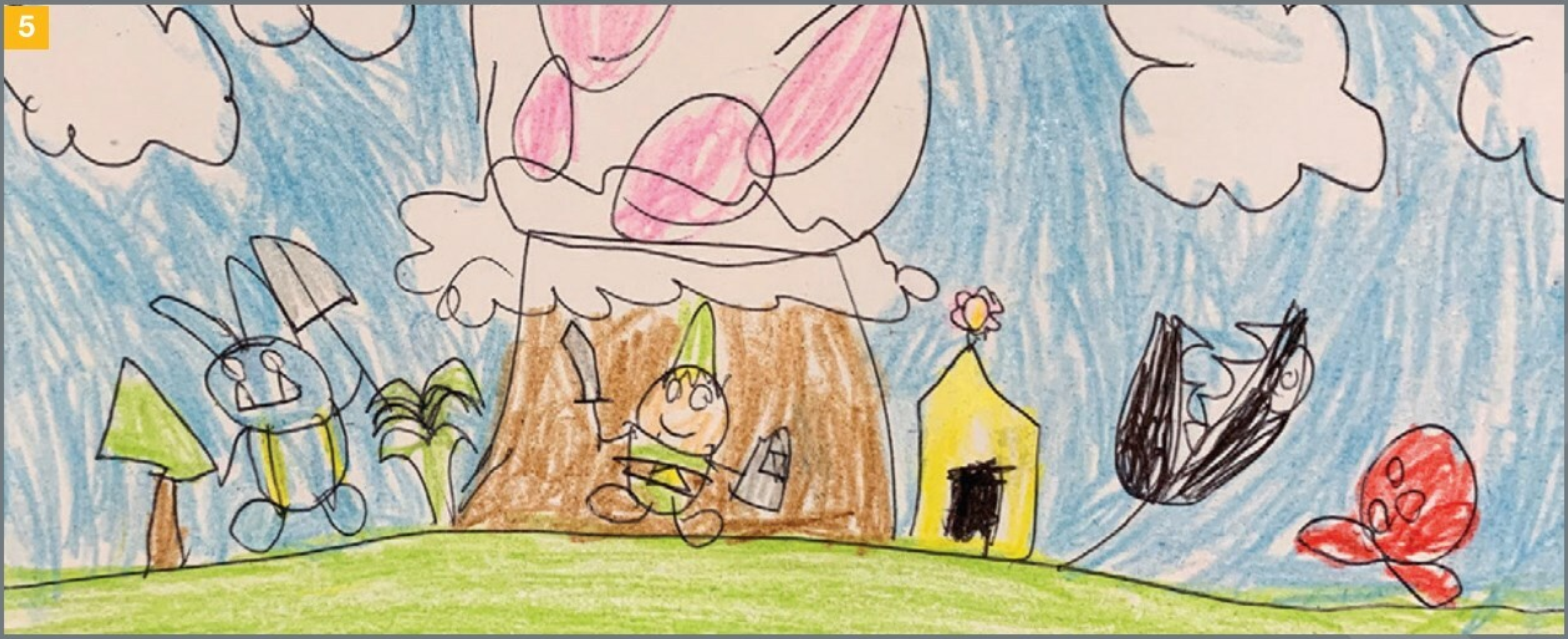

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THE MANY CONTROVERSIES OF CYBERPUNK 2077

Cyberpunk 2077 had a disastrous release. It was just another in a long line of controversies surrounding CD Projekt Red's open-world epic

by Blake Hester

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Cyberpunk 2077 was one of the most talked-about games of last year, but likely not for the reasons its developer CD Projekt Red wanted. Announced in 2012, and increasingly hyped after the release of The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt in 2015, Cyberpunk was met with great reviews – initially. However, in the ensuing weeks, after people got their hands on the game, the state of Cyberpunk's buggy console releases has largely soured public perception of the company – and led to a class-action lawsuit.

While the fallout from Cyberpunk's release in 2020 has been dramatic, it faced plenty of pre-release controversy. Most notably, the game's marketing teams have had numerous cases of offensive and transphobic tweets. In 2018, GOG, a digital storefront owned by CD Projekt, tweeted a reference sympathetic to Gamergate – a harassment campaign targeting women of the game industry under the guise of "ethics in game journalism" that led to numerous rape and death threats, as well as doxxings and swattings. The same year, the official Cyberpunk account replied to a fan asking, "Did you just assume their gender?!," a joke used online to make fun of transfolk.

The next year, at E3 2019, CDPR was criticized again for transphobia. This time it wasn't a tweet, but content of Cyberpunk. Specifically, an in-game ad featuring a feminine character with a large penis bulge and the text "Mix It Up." When criticized for the content, CDPR artist Kasia Redesiuk, who designed the Mix It Up ad, told *Polygon*, "I like how this person looks [...] However, this model is used – their beautiful body is used – for corporate reasons. They are displayed there just as a thing, and that's the terrible part of it."

"I don't buy it," games critic and trans woman Stacey Hensley wrote for *Polygon* in her December 2020 piece on Cyberpunk's marketing. "While a cutting critique of queer commodification might have been part of the idea's nucleus, the outcome is a commodification itself, objectifying trans people as creatures of deviance, defined by their genitals and suitable only for sexualization or rejection."

Additionally, CDPR labor practices have been under intense scrutiny recently. In September 2020, citing a CDPR employee and an internal email sent to staff, *Bloomberg* reported the studio was mandating six-day work weeks from its employees, walking back its promise that Cyberpunk would be developed without forced crunch, an industry term for large amounts of overtime. *Bloomberg's* source also said some employees at CDPR had already been working overtime for more than a year.

Despite these controversies, it doesn't seem to have impacted people's purchasing decisions. Before the game's release in December 2020, CDPR announced it had received 8 million pre-orders for Cyberpunk, which covered the game's development costs before the game was even on store shelves. On December 10, the game's release day, the company also announced it had made more than $50 million in revenue on Steam alone. No matter what the company said or did, people were excited to finally play the game. That seemed to change for many players when they were affected by CDPR's behind-the-scenes failings.

The state of Cyberpunk was not immediately evident looking at pre-release reviews of the game, most of which were positive. Despite praise, a common criticism with the game was how buggy it was for reviewers, a lot of whom also mentioned that CDPR forbade reviewers from publishing their own footage of the game, instead supplying its own approved footage for video review. Additionally, console review copies were not distributed to press, so early reviews were based only on PC code.

It didn't take long to find out why CDPR was being so restrictive with pre-release access to the game. Put simply: On console, Cyberpunk was a technical disaster. On PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, consoles the game had been marketed to for years, the game barely ran. Dismal framerates, glitches and crashes were common and persistent issues for players buying the game soon after it was released. To put it in perspective, at *Game Informer*, we gave Cyberpunk a 9 out of 10 review score on PC. On console, we gave the game a 5.5 out of 10. PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S versions of the game have not yet been released, though the game is playable on those systems via backward compatibility.

In November 2020, CDPR joint CEO Adam Kiciński said that on base consoles Cyberpunk ran lower than the PlayStation 4 Pro and Xbox One X, but was still "surprisingly good." This was, of course, not actually the case.

On December 14, four days after the game was released, CDPR issued a formal apology for how the game performed on last-gen consoles. "We should have paid more attention to making it play better on PlayStation 4 and Xbox One," CDPR said in a statement signed by company leadership. The company also committed itself to issuing patches addressing the game's many bugs and technical problems, asking players to give the developer a chance, but also saying it understood if people wanted to refund the game via the PSN or Xbox digital storefronts, the retailer where the game was purchased, or even CD Projekt Red itself.

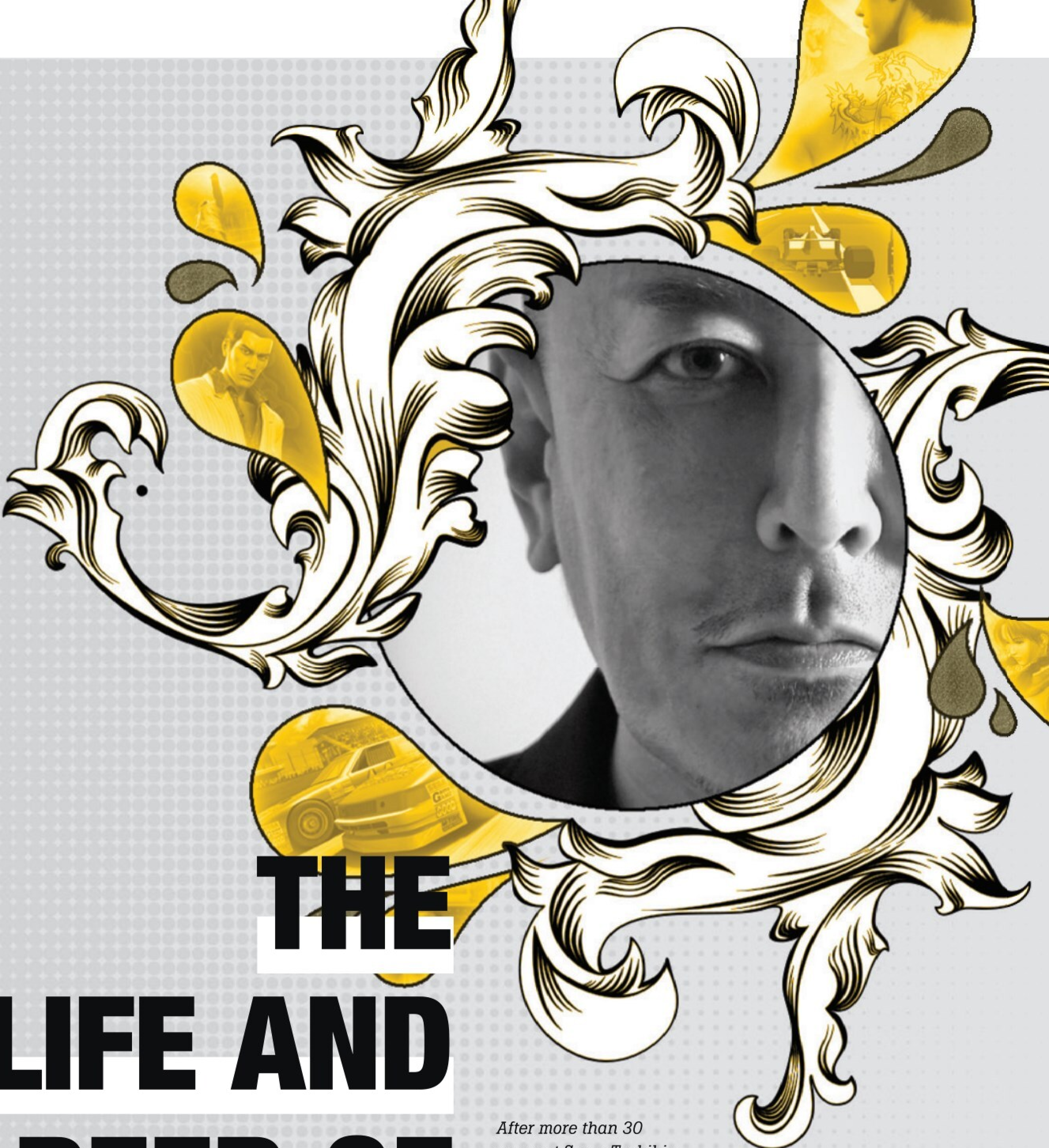
Sony took things a step further and on December 17 delisted Cyberpunk from the PlayStation Store "until further notice." As of this writing, the game hasn't been relisted. Microsoft has not taken similar measures, though the Cyberpunk page on the Xbox storefront does have this disclaimer: "Users may experience performance issues when playing this game on Xbox One consoles until this game is updated."

Players were not the only ones upset with the situation; CDPR developers also voiced their frustrations with how everything was playing out. In a December 2020 report from *Bloomberg*, in a video call with CDPR's board, employees asked management why it had said the game was playable in January that year when it wasn't. "Another developer asked whether CD Projekt's directors felt it was hypocritical to make a game about corporate exploitation while expecting that their employees work overtime," *Bloomberg* wrote in its report. "The response was vague and noncommittal."

Cyberpunk's disastrous month was capped off on December 30 when Rosen Law Firm in New York filed a class-action lawsuit against CDPR on behalf of "purchasers of the securities of CD Projekt S.A." According to the lawsuit, CDPR "failed to disclose (1) Cyberpunk 2077 was virtually unplayable on the [last-] generation Xbox or PlayStation systems due to an enormous number of bugs; (2) as a result, Sony would remove Cyberpunk 2077 from the PlayStation store, and Sony, Microsoft and CD Projekt would be forced to offer full refunds for the game; (3) consequently, CD Projekt would suffer reputational and pecuniary harm; and (4) as a result, defendants' statements about its business, operations, and prospects, were materially false and misleading and/or lacked a reasonable basis at all relevant times." CDPR responded, saying it would "undertake vigorous action to defend itself against any such claims."

Announced in January, Poland's Office of Competition and Consumer Protection is now investigating the studio. Should the company not address Cyberpunk's issues in future patches, it could be fined dramatically, costing the company 10 percent of its annual income.

Cyberpunk 2077 has been out for over two months now. According to CDPR, the game has sold more than 13 million copies, which per *Bloomberg*, is lower than industry analysts anticipated. Where the game will stand in the future, both in terms of its technical performance and sales, remains to be seen; PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S versions of the game are expected to be released sometime this year. Regardless, it's safe to say Cyberpunk's launch was not what CDPR had hoped for or expected. Now it's just whether or not the developer can dig itself out of the hole it has created. ◆



THE LIFE AND CAREER OF TOSHIHIRO NAGOSHI

After more than 30 years at Sega, Toshihiro Nagoshi has had a hand in creating some of the most influential games of all time, including Virtua Fighter, Daytona USA, and Shenmue. These days, he's most well known for being one of the creative forces behind the Yakuza series. We caught up with Nagoshi to learn more about his life, career, and why he thinks Sega should've fired him in the '90s.

by Blake Hester

Yakuza: Like a Dragon

TOSHIHIRO NAGOSHI KNOWS HOW TO MAKE AN ENTRANCE.

He's seven seven minutes late after a smoke break, wearing a $2,700 Louis Vuitton jacket. Coy yet honest, reserved and flashy all at once, somehow, he fits his 30 years of game-development history into an hour-long Zoom call. It's a story that encompasses childhood trauma, Yu Suzuki, and drunken meetings that turned into one of the biggest cult franchises in video game history. But it all starts far away from where he's sitting right now in Tokyo.

Nagoshi grew up in the small, rural prefecture of Yamaguchi. When you talk to him about his early life, he doesn't have a lot of positives to share. Nagoshi came from a poor household, his parents victims of sizable debt, and his father in particular had a gambling problem. Despite saying he recognizes that what he went through with his family was a necessary learning experience that got him to where he is today, he has a lot of complicated feelings about the household he grew up in.

Nagoshi says his younger life lacked direction, and that he didn't really have aspirations for himself in Yamaguchi. He did, however, have one dream: He had seen Tokyo on TV, and something about city life appealed to him. After graduating high school, as the people he grew up with began getting jobs in their hometown, Nagoshi realized he didn't want to live a similar life. He didn't want his parents' lives either. So, he left.

"Just to be honest, I grew up in a poor household and watching my parents, I kind of figured that staying [t]here and following in their footsteps wouldn't necessarily lead to a happy life for myself," Nagoshi says through a translator. "So, just being young and having a strong desire to get out and make a life for myself was one of the reasons that I went to Tokyo."

Later in life, after working his way up within the game industry, Nagoshi returned to Yamaguchi to pay off his parents' debt. Unfortunately, however, he says by the time he was able to do this both his mother and father had dementia, to the point they were unable to recognize his actions or appreciate what he had done.

"But I did hear later on from the people of the town that my parents, when they saw that I had an interview published in a magazine or saw me in the media, they would take my picture around," Nagoshi says. "They would really proudly tell the townspeople about me. Hearing that really made me happy. Even though the money caused strains in the relationship, I'm 100-percent at peace with it now."

In the 1980s, Nagoshi moved to Tokyo to study movie production in college. His timing wasn't great, though, as the Japanese film industry wasn't exactly a lucrative business. Looking unsuccessfully for a job in movie production, Nagoshi says he came across an opening at Sega. At the time, he says he knew Sega was a big company, and he thought there was no way he'd ever be brought onboard. He applied anyway, "For kicks," as he puts it. Nagoshi wasn't turned down, but in fact was hired to Sega AM2, a development team within Sega known in the '90s for its arcade and fighting games, headed up by legendary developer Yu Suzuki.

Having no formal background in game development and working with Suzuki, Nagoshi says his early years at Sega in the '90s came with a steep learning curve. On the other hand, he racked up an impressive portfolio, working as a designer on Virtua Racing, directing Daytona USA, and even working on Suzuki's over-budget magnum opus, Shenmue, the most expensive game ever made at the time.

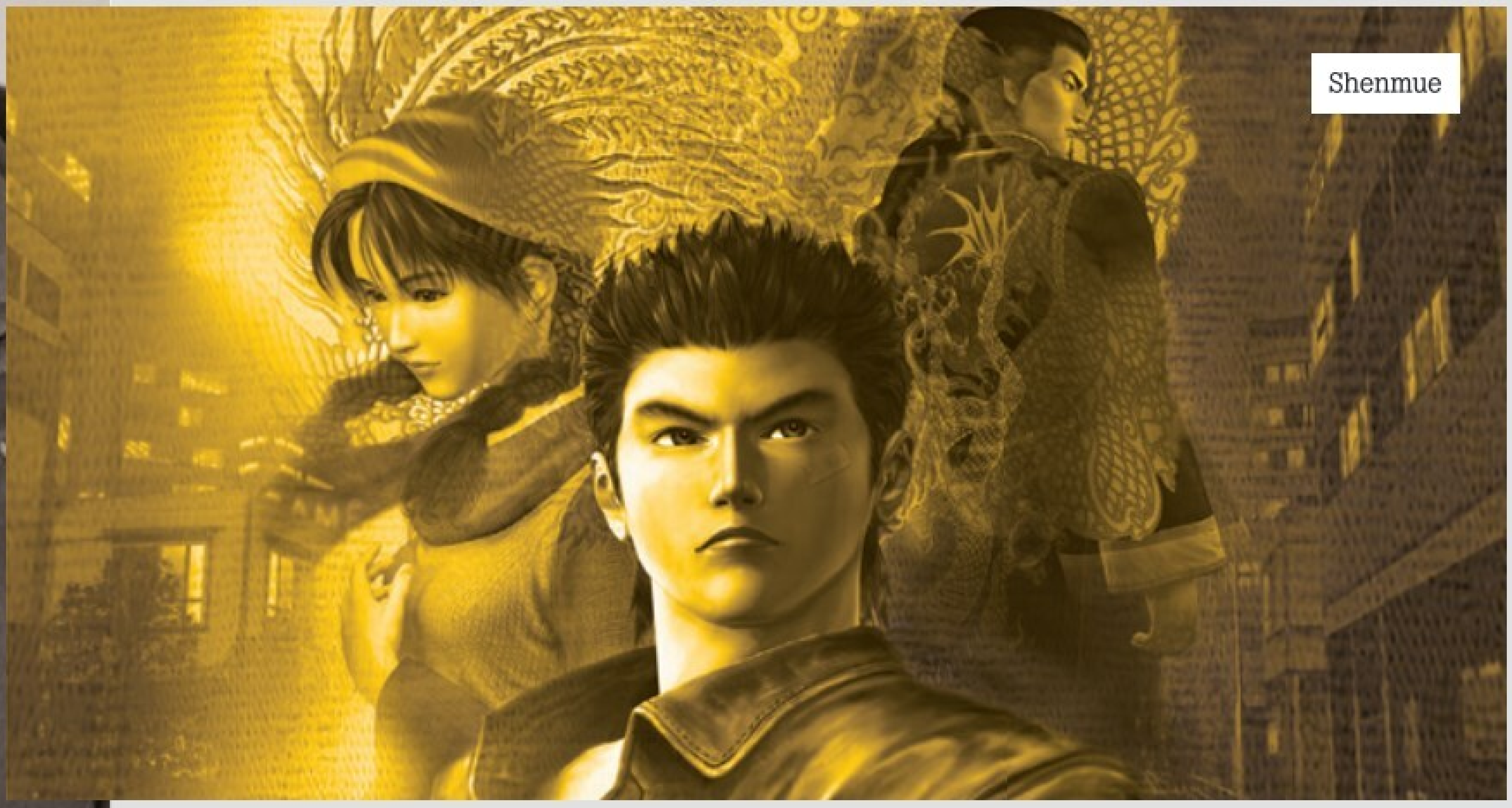
In the '90s, Suzuki was not only a big deal in the game industry, he was a big deal at Sega – which perhaps afforded him and his team special treatment within the company. Nagoshi says the team was isolated from the rest of Sega, physically at a distance from its headquarters. The AM2 office even needed a special key to enter. "It was sort of irregular and a top-secret type of operation that was going on," Nagoshi says.

"It was very strange, where even though he was part of Sega, the president of Sega would not know what [Suzuki] was working on at that time," he says. "There were occasions where, every six months or so, the president and his entourage would come knocking on the door demanding to see, like, 'What's going on in there?' And there were times that even then we wouldn't show them what was being worked on."

"It's amazing that [Suzuki] didn't get fired," Nagoshi says, laughing, adding it's amazing the entire team wasn't fired along with him.

By the end of Nagoshi's time with AM2, Sega wasn't doing great. The Dreamcast, released in North America on Sept. 9, 1999, ended up being a failure for the company, eventually leading Sega to exit the hardware space entirely and focus on developing games for companies like Sony, Microsoft, and even its once-fiercest rival, Nintendo.

At the same time, Sega was restructuring its internal development teams, splitting them into eight separate semi-autonomous studios, each led by one of the company's top designers. Nagoshi was appointed president of Amusement Vision, which would go on to make the Monkey Ball and F-Zero series for arcades and the GameCube. Three years later, in 2003, Sega restructured itself once again, merging the studios into four teams and inviting the heads of the three most successful studios to become


Shenmue

Daytona USA

Yakuza

executives within Sega. Nagoshi was one of those three, as was Sonic Team's Yuji Naka and Hisao Oguchi, who later became Sega's president for a time. Amusement Vision was merged with members of Jet Set Radio Future developer Smilebit, eventually becoming Sega NE R&D – or New Entertainment Research & Development – in 2004.

"Our first real challenge was how to combine the strengths of these two developing teams and make something new," Nagoshi says. His solution was to come up with a game unlike anything either team had ever worked on; something completely new that would appeal to Japanese audiences. To brainstorm new ideas, Sega NE R&D would take company field trips to a place that would come to define Nagoshi's career: Kabukicho, Tokyo's red-light district, at one time the heart of the city's yakuza activity, and the real-world inspiration for Kamurocho, the primary setting for nearly every Yakuza game.

"We all really liked to drink a lot," Nagoshi says. "The discussions in meeting rooms are important to have in meeting rooms, but also, just being in a completely different setting where we're just kind of casually having drinks, I felt, was a much easier way for me to communicate with especially the younger team members and have them feel like it was easier to speak out with courage."

"I've been to so many of the bars and shops there [in Kabukicho], so I know a lot of it," he continues. "But it's only just a tiny percentage of this huge, bustling area of the city. When we were drinking and talking about it, someone, and it wasn't me, someone mentioned, 'What if there was a game where we can go to all of the places here? What if there was a way to do that?' That really stuck and eventually led to the Yakuza series."

The creation of the first Yakuza game is a well-told story at this point (we did our own version in issue 301). At the time, the game was a risk, appealing not to children or western markets, but only to adult Japanese males – not the most profitable demographic. Initially, as the story goes, Sega rejected the game's proposal, only for Hajime Satomi, CEO and owner of the holding group Sega Sammy, to become interested in the project after footage of it was sneaked into a presentation of upcoming Sega games. Through Nagoshi's persistence, and the backing of Satomi, the first Yakuza was greenlit and released in Japan on Dec. 8, 2005, to critical acclaim, selling 232,650 copies in the country that year. A sequel followed quickly; Yakuza 2 was released in Japan on Dec. 7, 2006.

In Japan, the Yakuza games have consistently sold well, and their success has even led celebrities to getting involved with the series. Actors known for appearing in yakuza films, like Riki Takeuchi and Shô Aikawa, known stateside for their roles in Takashi Miike's Dead or Alive trilogy, and even legendary actor/director Takeshi Kitano have all appeared in the Yakuza series. Additionally, Miike, a prolific Japanese director known for his yakuza movies, directed *Like a Dragon*, a live-action adaptation of the first game.

In the states, though, the Yakuza series didn't catch on fire in quite the same way ... until Yakuza 0 was released in 2017 to rave reviews and global sales beyond expectations. "As far as my personal favorites go, after Yakuza 1, it is 0, so it makes me really happy that it was received so well," Nagoshi says. Yakuza 0 has since led to a Yakuza renaissance in western territories. In fact, Yakuza 6: The Song of Life sold just as many copies in the United States and Europe as it did in Japan. In November 2020, Sega announced the series had sold 14 million copies globally.

"When it comes down to it, I really feel like the sort of simple, straightforward storytelling had a lot to do with why global fans took to [Yakuza 0] so much," he adds. "You know, we can't really control sparks like that from happening. But the team and I often talk about, like, 'Think that's gonna happen again?' Like, we really wish that [would] happen again."

In 2011, Ryu Ga Gotoku Studios was established, a dedicated Yakuza team under Sega CS1 (itself a continuation of NE). Following the success of the Yakuza series, Nagoshi has continued to climb the ranks within Sega. In 2012, he became the chief creative officer of Sega Japan and was added to the company's board of directors. The following year, he was also added to the board of directors for Atlus, a subsidiary of Sega known for the Persona and Shin Megami Tensei series. A far cry from his humble roots in Yamaguchi, Nagoshi has become a recognizable figure in Japanese game development, and a bit of a cult icon in the west, known for his striking sense of fashion. As he tells it, though, that notoriety has come with bit of a cost; he can't frequent Kabukicho in quite the same way he used to.

"[O]ne of the reasons why we don't go as often anymore is because as the series became more successful and popular and I would have more opportunities to go out and speak with the media and become more known, people would recognize me more when I went there," Nagoshi says. "So it became harder to go out and relax and enjoy it."

With Yakuza: Like a Dragon out around the world now, Nagoshi is looking toward the future – and he's surprisingly open about the possibilities, without confirming anything. On one hand, he says he knows Yakuza fans want more Yakuza. On the other, he says he has a talented team, so he's open to trying something new.

"The Ryu Ga Gotoku team members, they've only really worked on the Yakuza series," Nagoshi says. "But I think it would be a waste if these really talented team members that we have aren't able to use all of their skills to their full potential. That might be challenging themselves, creating something of a whole different genre and a different style. We don't know that yet, but that's something that we're really taking into consideration right now for the growth of our team as a whole."

Yakuza 0

Captured on PS5
© 2020 MARVEL

Miles Morales & Me

The hometown hero I strive to be

by Jason Guisao, associate editor

The city that never sleeps is as dangerous as it's ever been, but Harlem's friendly neighborhood Spider-Man does it all; from saving helpless bodega cats to dismantling nuclear time-bombs. And like any modern-day celebrity, Spider-Man always makes time to respond to Twitter followers or take goofy selfies with adoring fans. Yes, the new web-slinger is as dependable and personable as they come, but I know his greatest secrets. Miles Morales, the young man behind the mask, loves playing video games, producing groovy hip-hop beats, and conducting elaborate science experiments. He agonizes over his hair in the bathroom mirror and has a weak spot for dulce de coco. But, more importantly, he looks like me.

I grew up a starry-eyed Afro-Latino kid in Spanish Harlem. Day in and day out, the beautiful mix of salsa and rap blared from every apartment window. Lifelong friendships were forged at the nearest basketball court. I remember the helado cart down the street from my middle school and the summer block parties where opening fire hydrants was our DIY version of going to the beach. Your barber was practically family; getting a haircut from someone else was flat-out disrespectful! The best off-brand sodas were less than a dollar, and sometimes local pizzerias would give kids a free pepperoni slice with a slushie. At night, I'd fall asleep to distant car alarms; Héctor Lavoe's smooth voice or Willie Colón's raspy trumpet vibrating through my thin bedroom walls.

Returning to Harlem as an adult was surreal: The community is not what it used to be. Family businesses have given way to luxurious condominiums, expensive supermarkets, and middle-class fast-food chains. Police surveillance has increased, meaning that instances of racial profiling happen at a more frequent rate. Moreover, rent is unaffordable at most apartment complexes and historically cheap foods, like deli sandwiches, are reminiscent of inflated Midtown prices. Gentrification is displacing long-time Harlem residents. Yet, beneath the incessant sirens and obnoxiously loud truck horns, I *can* barely make out the hard-hitting bass of reggaeton. In the shadows of ritzy hotels, street artists preserve Harlem's history with elaborate murals. The culture endures.

In Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales, like in reality, my old neighborhood is in the midst of an identity crisis. The petroleum conglomerate Roxxon establishes its Manhattan headquarters in the center of Harlem; the company's dark, foreboding tower visible from the Upper West and East Sides. At the start of the game, Miles has just moved from Brooklyn, and the sudden change in location is hard for him to accept. Thanks to the help of his best friend, Ganke, as well as his mother's timely, morale-boosting speeches, Miles learns to appreciate his community by simply being present: Dropping by Teo's Bodega to take his adorable cat for a swing; mingling with various Harlemites at music festivals. When a substantial amount of community supplies are stolen, the homeless shelter closes because of gang activity, and Roxxon's evil intentions come to light, I don the mask with Miles and become the hometown hero I always wished I could be.

There's one moment toward the end of the game that sticks out to me even now: Months after completing the central narrative. Hailey Cooper, a local street artist, pulls our hero to the side and says, "There's been a Spider-Man protecting New York since I was a kid, but to have one that cares about me and my home, it means everything." Miles laughs the way he always does whenever he gets flustered and replies, "It's my home, too." Finally – even if it's just in some digital game world or etched onto the page of a widely read comic book – my community got the protector it deserved. And if I timed my dodges right or tapped a button enough times to save innocent people from danger, I could be that protector, too. While swinging at high speeds above Harlem's bustling marketplaces or fighting a mob of thieves in cinematic fashion, I was simply living out my superhero fantasies through Miles Morales. But in those quieter moments – when listening to the sounds of the city through Uncle Aaron's old music recordings or gazing at BLM wall art through watery eyes – it's me under that mask.

The views and opinions expressed in this column are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer

Returning Home In Animal Crossing: New Horizons Is Difficult

by Andrew Reiner, editor-in-chief

Animal Crossing: New Horizons delivered a diversion when I needed it most during the pandemic. The real world was bubbling with stress and anxiety, but that wasn't the case on an island governed by raccoons. While I questioned their money-making schemes, those little critters put my mind at ease with escapism that hit like a warming ray of light.

In the opening moments of the pandemic, my mind would shift from dreadful COVID-19 news stories to determining what shade of blue I wanted my walls to be in my beautiful home on my scenic island. My emotions bounced all over the place, but Animal Crossing: New Horizons helped me keep my fears and uncertainty in check. It either took my mind off of the pandemic, or gave me time to cool down and not freak out about it so intensely.

I've always loved the Animal Crossing series, but this entry holds more of a unique charge than its predecessors, and it isn't because of how it's different. I hold it closer to my heart because of the circumstances to which it was played. Building a different life with animals as neighbors was exactly what I needed at the right time. Hearing a hamster wish me well is something I probably wouldn't have thought much of at all in any other Animal Crossing game, but with a virus sweeping across the world and my future and health tied to it, his words actually carried some weight. I dug the hell out of that little guy. He always knew what to say.

I visited my home away from home almost every day for months. I was away for a week or two here and there (especially during the Easter egg hunt), but did my best to stay on top of my chores and routines. I worked hard to pay off my mortgages and create my ideal home.

I scoured my island and others for every fossil and fish I could find for the museum, yet didn't much care for diving for new discoveries when that swimming update hit. I had fallen off of it just like I had every other Animal Crossing before it. This series holds my interest intently for a couple of months, and then I move on.

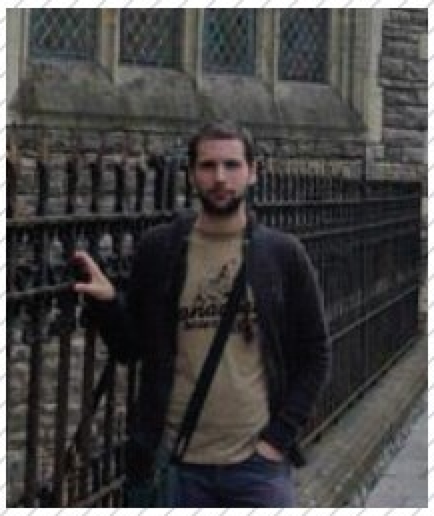
I want to have an Animal Crossing in my gaming rotation, but getting back into the swing of things has always been challenging for me. After being away for months, the virtual abode I lovingly put time and effort into no longer feels like my home. The villagers who used to love seeing me are now surprised I'm here or don't even know who I am. My home is filled with cockroaches, and it takes some serious detective work to determine exactly what I was saving up for or planning to do next.

Part of my disconnect comes from how I am wired and what knowledge of the game I retain, but a big part of it comes from how this particular game is designed. Animal Crossing is brilliant because it doesn't hold your hand, give you extensive mission logs, or a breadcrumb trail to follow. We connect with it in a much different way than most games, but once that connection is severed, not having those things creates a bit of confusion on a return trip.

That bond I formed with New Horizons during the beginning of the pandemic is also no longer there, and could perhaps be a reason why I'm having such a hard time getting back into this particular installment. Nintendo did a better job of organizing goals through Nook Miles, but I still feel like a stranger in a strange land trying to figure out what I should be doing. The magic it held in that one particular moment of my life was huge, but is now just a memory.

Going back to any game over time can be challenging. Animal Crossing is one of the hardest for me, and always has been. Unlike MMOs or competitive games, its hooks don't have the same staying power. I sometimes think about the homes I've had in these games, and fondly remember how I made them my own. They're more like vacation houses for me than the second homes they are for some people. I envy those of you who continually get something out of these games, because I truly love their bright outlook on life, and, pandemic or not, could use a dose of it often.

The views and opinions expressed in this column are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer



Traveling Abroad With Resident Evil 4

One day, while researching online, Albert Marin found a door at the Seville Cathedral in Spain that he recognized from Resident Evil 4. An obsession was born. At first, searching for pictures of the real-world locations in RE4 became a hobby, finding other examples throughout his home country of Spain and the United Kingdom. In 2014, he started creating a mod for Resident Evil 4: Ultimate HD Edition. Marin began going and photographing the real-world locations himself, importing them into the game and upscaling its textures using his own reference material. We talked with him about what it's been like traveling at home and abroad for his favorite game.

Resident Evil 4 HD Project

Owner Name:
Albert Marin

Occupation:
Mod Designer

Location:
Barcelona, Spain

Website:
RE4HD.com

interview by Blake Hester

Tell me the first time you realized "There is a real thing in the world that is in RE4, and I am going to find it."
I didn't have the idea of going to those places by myself until the newest PC port was released. But I found the first texture by chance looking on the internet. I found a door that was from the Seville Cathedral, and then I thought to myself, "Hm, I will [look for more] just in case there's another thing in the building that was used in the game." And bingo. Then I thought, "I'll start looking in other places in Spain, just in case." And then I found out that they [Capcom] took textures from Madrid, Toledo, Segovia, and Barcelona. Since I am in Barcelona, it was really easy for me to look for textures in my city. With time, I was able to locate a lot of places.

Did it feel natural that you would just use those pictures in your new mod?
When [the PC port] was released, it was like, "Oh, I can't believe all the research work I've been doing the last four years, four or five years, it will have a use." It was really exciting to go to the real places and take the pictures for myself, because all the stuff I had on my computer at that time were all pictures from sites like Flickr. It was all pictures [from] other people, and some of them were quite low res.

How on Earth were you finding these places?
It was like, "Okay, if I find a door, let's try searching Google for 'Spain cathedral door.' Let's see what the results are." And I did the same with other places. It was all a matter of using the right key words. Simple as that. And a lot of patience, of course.

When you pinpoint a keyword, you're just Googling the hell out of that.
Since I was looking at the same textures for two or three years, I recognized really easily a door, a wall, or whatever it was in just a second. I have no idea how my brain does this, but it does.

How did you figure out they used pictures from the U.K. in the game?
It was the same. I found a door of Caerphilly Castle on Flickr. I was looking for castle doors and I found that door and I said, "Wow, it's the El Gigante door!" I saw it was in Caerphilly, and I simply looked for more pictures of that castle. Then I found out they used a lot of textures of that castle and I found out it was in Wales and I looked for other castles in the region. I found out they used textures from Caerphilly, Raglan, and Chepstow. So I went to those three places.

Did you ever expect your work on this mod would take you to a different country?
No way.

What is your favorite real-world thing you sought out for this?
I don't know why, it's a door in Segovia. It's the door that leads you to the special costumes. It was really hard to find [...] because it's a random door in Segovia, it has nothing special. But I like it. The craziest thing I found, maybe you already know, is that rock texture, also in Segovia. I thought to myself, "This rock pattern looks familiar to me." I took a few pictures of it just in case. I couldn't believe when I arrived home that that rock surface was really in the game.

You just saw that out one day?
Well, I was in the tourist route in Segovia. Another thing that I found out is that Capcom staff, they didn't deviate too much from the typical tourist routes. So it was really easy to follow their tracks from the tour they did. ◆

To see more of Marin's work, go to RE4HD.com

Restoring Resident Evil 4

The inspiration for this article comes from our friend and former *Game Informer* intern Jacob Geller, whose video "Art Restoration (and the Biggest Mod in Resident Evil History)" highlights Marin's work. Check it out at: youtube.com/JacobGeller.

THE EMPIRE COMES BACK

Lucasfilm's return to gaming and what it means

Star Wars and Indiana Jones are Lucasfilm's juggernaut entertainment properties, and they have a long history in video games. However, the behind-the-scenes business details that have made those games possible have shifted many times over the years. With the unveiling of the new Lucasfilm Games, we recently witnessed another change that is likely to have a major impact on these popular franchises for the foreseeable future. But how does it affect you and the games you play? That's a big question to tackle at once, so we're breaking it down by answering five smaller questions.

by Joe Juba

WHAT IS LUCASFILM GAMES?

First, let's take a quick look back: Lucasfilm used to have a dedicated gaming division, which was first called Lucasfilm Games in the '80s, then LucasArts in the '90s and on. It developed, published, and licensed out games based on movie properties (like Star Wars: The Force Unleashed and Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis), along with original titles (like Full Throttle and Maniac Mansion). However, LucasArts struggled to find its place in the industry during the '00s, and the division was effectively closed in 2013 following Disney's purchase of Lucasfilm.

This new incarnation of Lucasfilm Games does not represent the company jumping back into the deep end of game development. Instead, it is an entity that serves as the steward for Lucasfilm properties in gaming. Think of it like the banner flying over all interactive entertainment efforts related to Lucasfilm properties past and present. It oversees and licenses them to developers across the gaming industry – similar to Marvel Games' role in facilitating projects like Marvel's Spider-Man from Insomniac, and Marvel's Avengers from Crystal Dynamics.

WHAT IS DIFFERENT?

Because Lucasfilm Games hasn't announced its own internal projects, it might seem like nothing has changed. After all, Lucasfilm Games holds the keys to the brands, while other studios handle development; that's how it has worked for the last eight years. But the key change here is who is making those games.

Electronic Arts signed a 10-year deal in 2013 that gave it exclusive rights to develop Star Wars games (with a few exceptions, like Lego Star Wars titles). That's why most of the Star Wars games we've seen in recent years – including Star Wars: Squadrons and Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order – have been made by EA studios. Because that deal expires in 2023, Lucasfilm Games can start establishing partnerships with other companies right now, getting games in the pipeline and ready to release when the exclusivity period ends. Choosing the right games (and the right developers) is a responsibility that falls to Lucasfilm Games – and those decisions will play a major role in how gamers perceive Star Wars (and the company's other brands) going forward.

In an interview with *StarWars.com*, Lucasfilm Games vice president Douglas Reilly says: "We've got a lot of stuff we're ready to start sharing with fans, because we've been working quietly behind the scenes for a while now, waiting for this moment."

WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH STAR WARS?

As of this writing, the only newly announced Star Wars game is an open-world experience published by Ubisoft and developed by Massive Entertainment (the studio behind The Division series). While specifics about the project are scarce, it may just be the start of Ubisoft's latest involvement with the franchise (it developed a few Star Wars games in the '00s). "This is the beginning of a long-term collaboration with Disney and Lucasfilm Games," says Ubisoft CEO Yves Guillemot in a press release. "And we are pleased to be working hand-in-hand to build upon the incredible legacy of Lucasfilm to create a game that we know Star Wars fans will love."

Because no exclusivity deal will be in place after 2023, fans should expect to hear announcements of other Star Wars games from other publishers in the months and years ahead. Lucasfilm has announced several new Star Wars shows, including one following Obi-Wan Kenobi, and another following Ahsoka Tano. Maybe we'll see games based on those – or even the popular *The Mandalorian* series – but only time will tell.

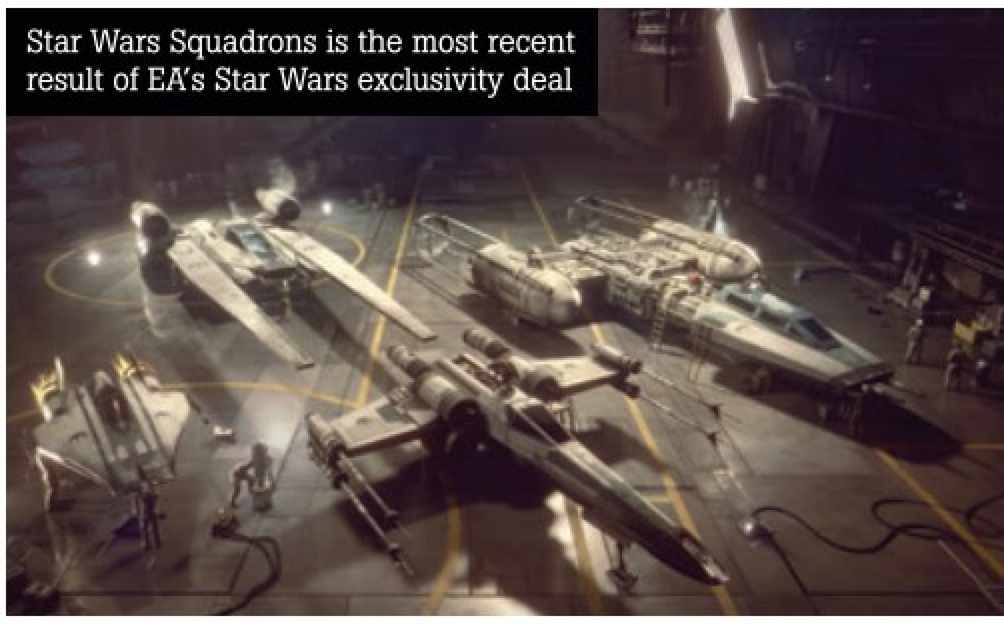
WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH INDIANA JONES?

Considering the franchise's focus on action, adventure, and exploration, it's baffling that we haven't seen a great Indiana Jones game in decades. That may be changing soon; Bethesda and Lucasfilm Games announced a new Indiana Jones game is in production at Machine Games (of Wolfenstein fame), with Todd Howard acting as executive producer. While not much more than a tease at this phase, Machine Games' expertise of blending story and action could be a great fit for everyone's favorite archeologist/adventurer.

WHAT ABOUT EA?

Though Electronic Arts will no longer have Star Wars exclusively, that doesn't mean the company can't work with Lucasfilm Games after 2023 to continue making Star Wars games. This situation isn't Lucasfilm "dropping" EA as a partner; it is just opening the door to other studios. Plus, the 10-year deal signed in 2013 isn't nullified; EA will still be your primary source for Star Wars games for another couple years.

In a statement to *Game Informer*, an EA representative says: "We are proud of our longstanding collaboration with Lucasfilm Games, which will continue for years to come. Our talented teams have created some of the most successful games in the history of the Star Wars franchise … We love Star Wars and look forward to creating more exciting Star Wars experiences for players to enjoy." ◆



Star Wars Squadrons is the most recent result of EA's Star Wars exclusivity deal

DECK OUT YOUR GAMING SPACE

by Matt Miller

1 Mavix Gaming Chairs

If you're looking for an excellent gaming chair, but don't need to feel like you're in an airplane cockpit or race car, the new line of Mavix gaming chairs deserve a close look. The sleek but understated form factor is more sophisticated than the majority of dedicated game seating, but still features beautiful lines and curves, and a fetching aesthetic. Multiple adjustable ergonomic options ensure an ideal personalized fit, including an adjustable head and neck support, excellent lumbar support, and an especially impressive tension recline with tremendous range and easy locking, among a spread of other options. Some of the adjustments were especially tight and challenging to position correctly during initial setup, but eventually resulted in a snug and comfortable product.

Once correctly customized, it's a seat that feels accomodating and fitted for even long work or gaming sessions.

Different models distinguish themselves through materials used on different parts, and some of the range of motion on targeted areas like the armrests. However, all models smartly address concerns around staying cool during use, from the M5's mesh seat to the M9's cooling gel seat.

The premium line of chairs comes with a premium price tag at any purchase tier, but there's no doubt that Mavix has carved out a niche that caters to dedicated players who seek responsive performance in a reserved but striking design.

SUPERB ■■■■■■■■■□

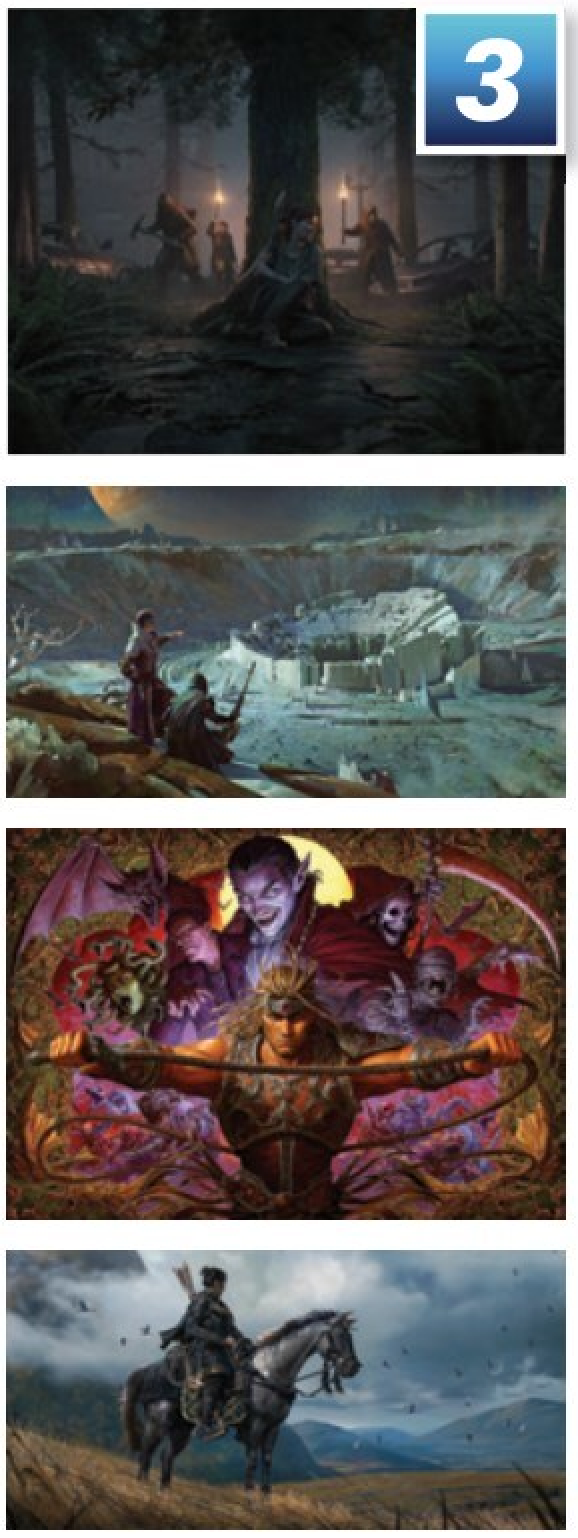
$555 (M5), $777 (M7, pictured), M9 ($999) | mavix.com

2 Yogibo Lounger

Yogibo boasts its products as a new generation of beanbags, and that descriptor holds up to scrutiny. Leveraging frictionless interior beads alongside a stretchy exterior fabric, the result is a form-fitting and absurdly comfy way to sit back and enjoy a long session of console gaming. The lounger has a low-sitting profile and takes up only 4 square feet, and at 14 pounds, it's easy to move around or keep tucked in a corner when not in use. When sitting, it conforms to your body, but maintains its chair shape. And if you're prone to spills, the cover is removable and washable. Consider an extra pillow for full head support when reclining, but in both form and function, it's an affordable and attractive single-person option, while other larger products in Yogibo's catalog cater to gatherings with friends.

VERY GOOD ■■■■■■■■□□

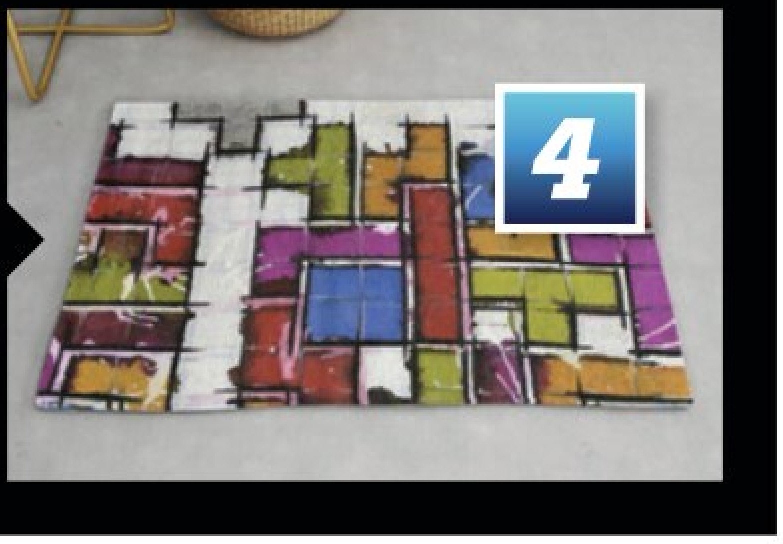
$189 | yogibo.com



3 Cook And Becker Video Game Art Giclees

Celebrate your favorite series with one of these breathtaking prints. Using Radiant White paper that provides remarkable color and contrast, each image is taken from digitally created art and aims to match the detail of the original. Available unframed or with a variety of framing and other options, it's a wonderful way to spruce up the walls around your display.

Starting at $110 | cookandbecker.com

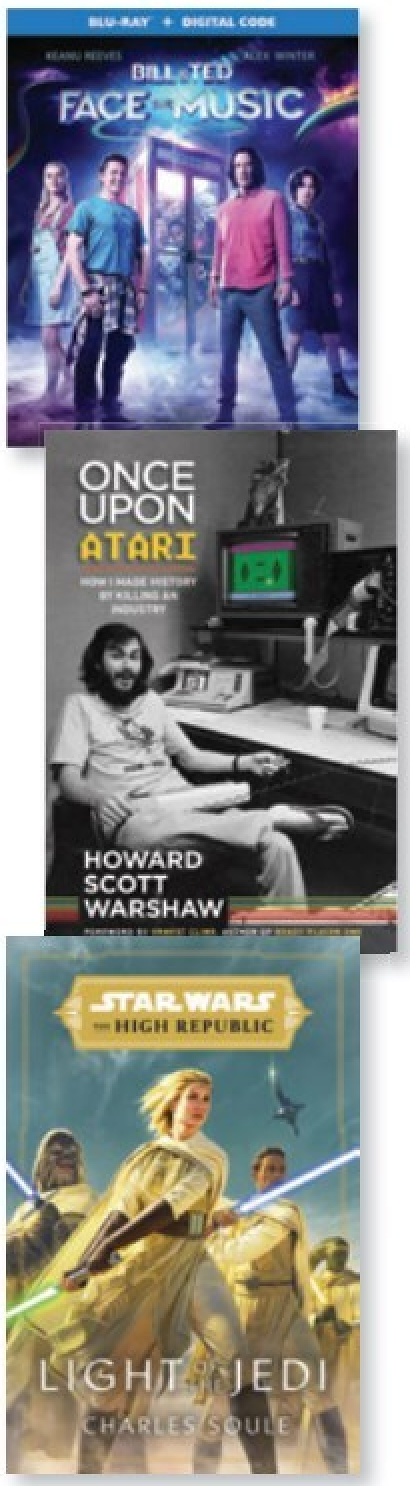


4 Life As Tetris Rug

Express your puzzle game love with this woven, polyester chenille rug. The custom-made floor covering has plenty of color to liven up your space, or to match to accessories, furniture, or pillows. It really ties your gaming room together.

$149 (4x6'), $49 (2x3') | society6.com

Media Shelf



BILL & TED FACE THE MUSIC

Simultaneously nostalgic and fresh, the two well-meaning rockers return with a time-traveling, world-hopping musical adventure, this time with their daughters in tow.

$19.99
billandted3.com

ONCE UPON ATARI: HOW I MADE HISTORY BY KILLING AN INDUSTRY BY HOWARD SCOTT WARSHAW

Focused on the early days of the video game industry, Warshaw's memoir offers a rich insight into the mind of one of the most important programmers of the Atari days, as told in his own words.

$14.99
newonceuponatari.hswarshaw.com

STAR WARS: THE HIGH REPUBLIC – LIGHT OF THE JEDI BY CHARLES SOULE

Part of a broader new publishing initiative across Star Wars media, *Light of the Jedi* is the debut novel that launches a new era of storytelling, set two centuries before the Skywalker Saga, with plenty of new characters, monsters, and events to discover.

$28.99
books.disney.com

CELEBRATING LUCASFILM'S 50TH ANNIVERSARY

One of the most influential media companies ever got its start in 1971; Lucasfilm helped reshape the way we think of blockbuster entertainment franchises. With Star Wars, Lucasfilm recognized the way collectibles could offer new ways to embrace the stories and characters that fans love. To honor the anniversary, here's just a few recent releases, no matter the era of Star Wars you celebrate. ***by Matt Miller***

1

EMPEROR PALPATINE FORCE FX ELITE LIGHTSABER

Relive one of the most dramatic confrontations of the prequels, as Palpatine finally pulls the mask away to reveal his true nature. This recreation of Darth Sidious' crimson saber features a metal hilt and the option to display on a stand with blade on or off. Buttons on the hilt offer a progressive ignition, where the red light climbs from hilt to point, as well as a variety of sound effects and connected color and lighting effects, from blaster deflecting to force lightning. It's as close as you're likely to get to the unlimited power you've always craved.

$249 | shop.hasbro.com

2

AHSOKA TANO PREMIER COLLECTION STATUE

In recent years, Lucasfilm's work beyond feature films has broadened the Star Wars franchise through animation, and no character better represents the potential for new favorites like Ahsoka Tano. Sculpted here communing with her companion animal, Morai, this 1/7 scale statue stands at 11 inches, and features beautiful detail and colors. Revealing the character as she comes into her own power and identity, it's the perfect showpiece for fans of The Clone Wars and Rebels.

$175 | gentlegiantltd.com

3

STAR WARS: THE BLACK SERIES SNOWSPEEDER

Few scenes from the original trilogy are so fondly remembered as The Empire Strikes Back's David vs. Goliath battle on Hoth, where a squadron of snowspeeders confronted the invading force of Imperial walkers. Scaled to match the 6-inch scale figure line, this highly detailed Rebel ship features a two-crew cockpit, landing gear, and a harpoon and tow cable perfect for entangling the most stubborn foes. Luke in his snow-pilot gear is sold separately, but gunner Dak Ralter is included with the speeder. Poor Dak – he never knew what hit him.

$119 (snowspeeder), $19.99 (individual figures)
shop.hasbro.com

LA-A-A-GGI-ING THRO-O-OWING-G YOU OFF-FF YOUR GA-AME?

MAYBE YOU JUST NEED A

SNICKERS

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» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Role-Playing

» PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

» DEVELOPER
BioWare

» RELEASE
May 14

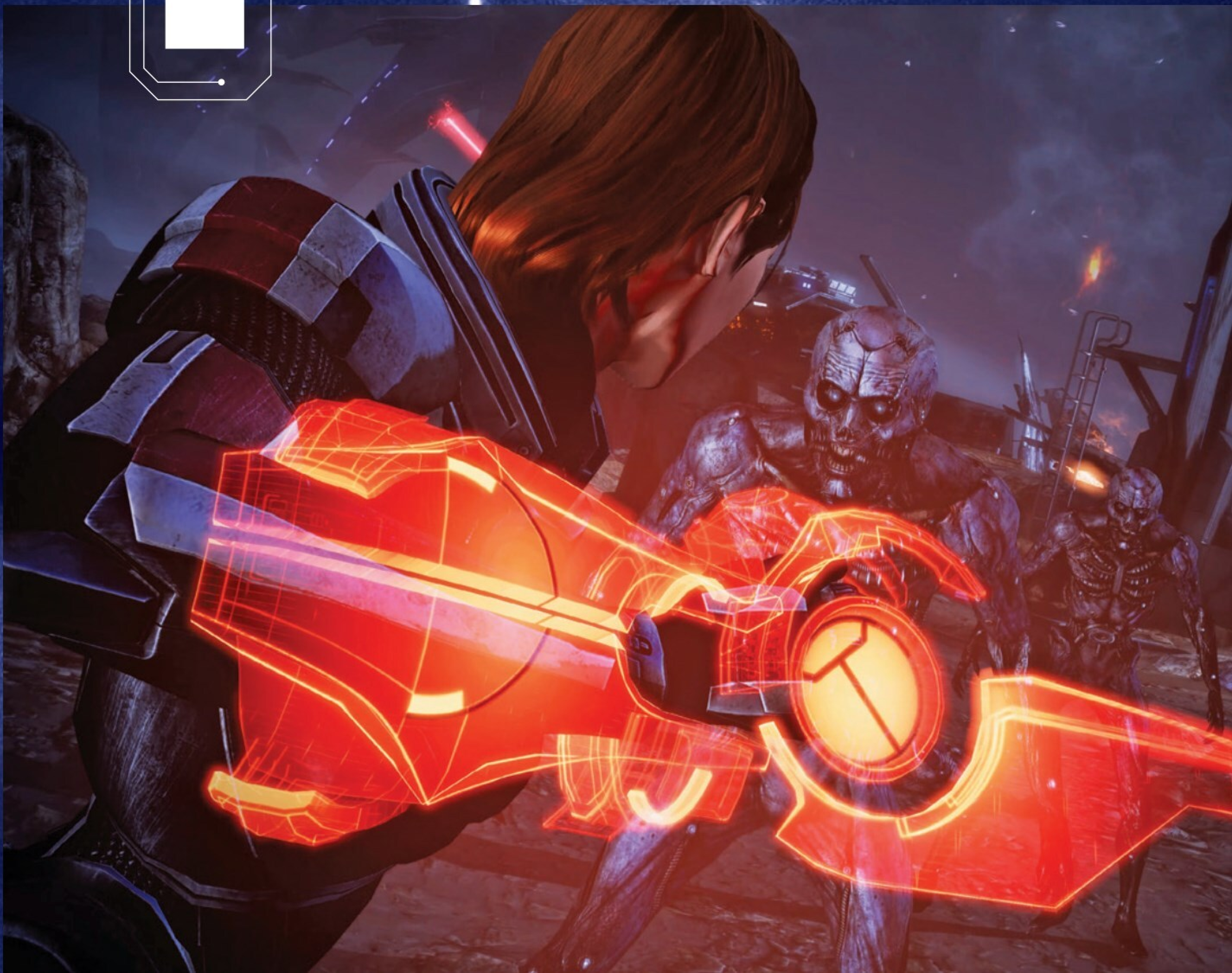
KEEPING COMMANDER SHEPARD'S STORY ALIVE

BioWare preserves the N7 hero's legacy with Mass Effect Legendary Edition

BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE

NORMANDY

Throughout every epoch of gaming history, we've taken on the role of heroes who protect and save the world from one deadly threat or another. There's an allure in being the savior and having the power to make a difference when the stakes are at their highest. However, little did we know when BioWare introduced us to Commander Shepard back in 2007 that this heroic journey and character would become so beloved and iconic.



As the developer behind Baldur's Gate and Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic, BioWare drew from its strengths in creating interesting stories and memorable characters, betting big by experimenting with a new level of player agency and choice by making the story – and your actions – span an entire trilogy. Everyone has fond memories and agonizing moments from the three games, whether it's justifying why you left Ashley or Kaidan on Virmire in Mass Effect 1, discussing the outcome of the intense suicide mission in Mass Effect 2, or taking a quiet moment to shoot cans with best bud Garrus before the final showdown in Mass Effect 3. Even if all the moments didn't completely live up to your expectations, you can't deny the impact the Mass Effect trilogy had on players and as a driving force of innovation in the industry.

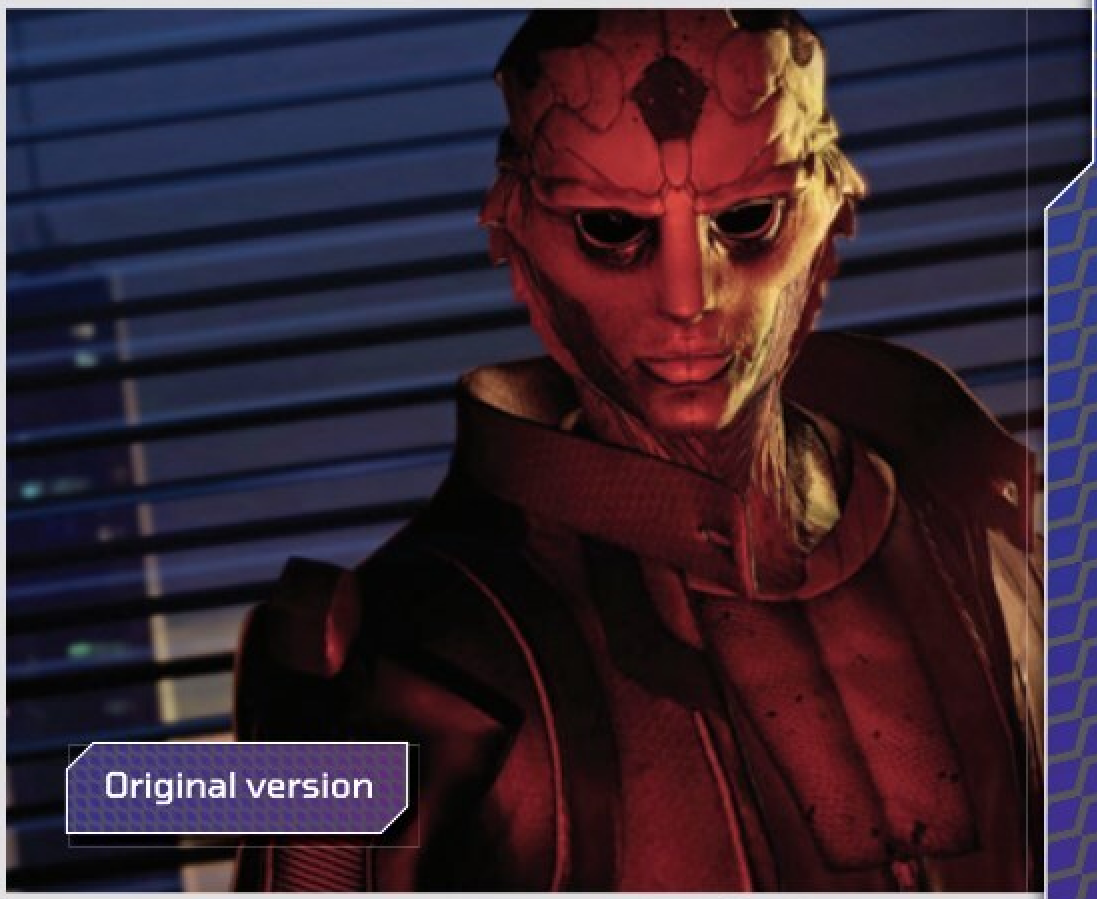
Now, finally, after years of fans pleading and rumors of its existence, the trilogy is coming back with Mass Effect Legendary Edition. It's time for veterans to relive the experience, and, most importantly, this remaster gives a fresh crop of gamers the opportunity to become Commander Shepard and see what made this journey special. To learn more about BioWare's approach to remastering a classic, we sat down with the team, getting the lowdown on the enhancements, the unexpected challenges, and why the stars finally aligned to bring Mass Effect to 4K.

THE JOURNEY TO A REMASTER

Finding a way to preserve the Mass Effect trilogy has been on the minds of BioWare's developers for some time now. "When we started talking about this, it was shortly after [Mass Effect: Andromeda]," says project director Mac Walters, who got his start at BioWare working on the original Mass Effect and has been with the series ever since. "To be fair, we've talked about doing a remaster, it feels like every year for several years – like, it keeps coming up. The fans have time and again said, 'When are you going to do it? Please do it.' And we've also just been keen to do it." Walters says it became a "passion project," something the team kept on their minds as they thought about the franchise's future.

To analyze what an endeavor like this would even look like and assess the cost, a small team eventually broke off to see what paths were possible. About a year and a half ago, Walters, alongside lead producer Melanie Faulknor and environment and character director Kevin Meek, finally got the greenlight to make the remaster a reality. "Sometimes you can pitch an idea, you know, three times, and it's the third time that it actually hits the mark, right?" Walters explains. "Part of that is I think remasters started to become more of a thing. We were seeing other game studios doing that, and so it just caught fire at the right time. It wasn't for lack of interest, passion, or desire on any of our parts to get it going. I think everybody wanted it. It was just being ready when the opportunity arose."

Mass Effect Legendary Edition was appropriately codenamed DeLorean, an obvious nod to *Back to the Future*. "Once we got started with it, it kind of just took on a life of its own," Walters says. "It's one of the few projects I've been on that sort of leaped almost straight to the full production phase." Because every year since Andromeda, the team has been investigating the possibility of something like this, their notes and ideas had been gathering over time. They had a solid starting point, but there were still massive, unpredictable challenges ahead. "I think, if we knew everything that we knew now, we probably might have even been a little bit more hesitant," Walters admits.



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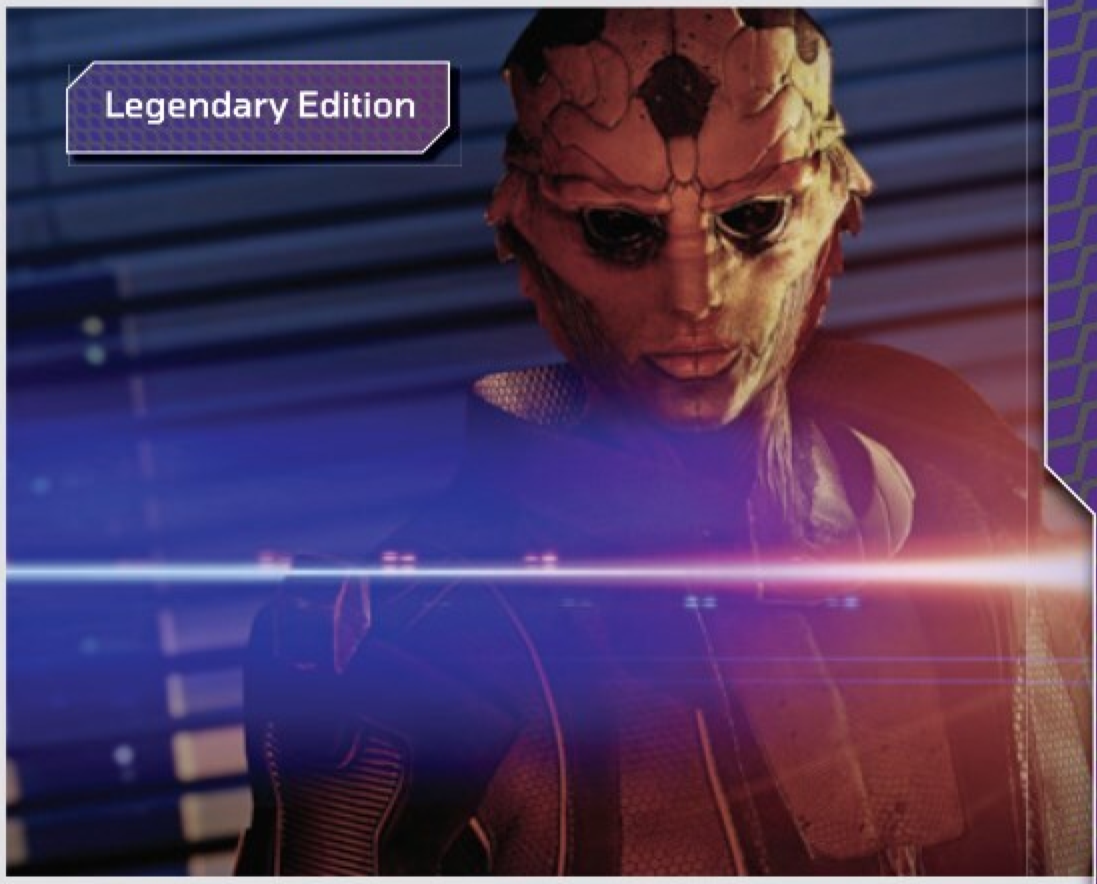


Legendary Edition

GOING BACK IN TIME

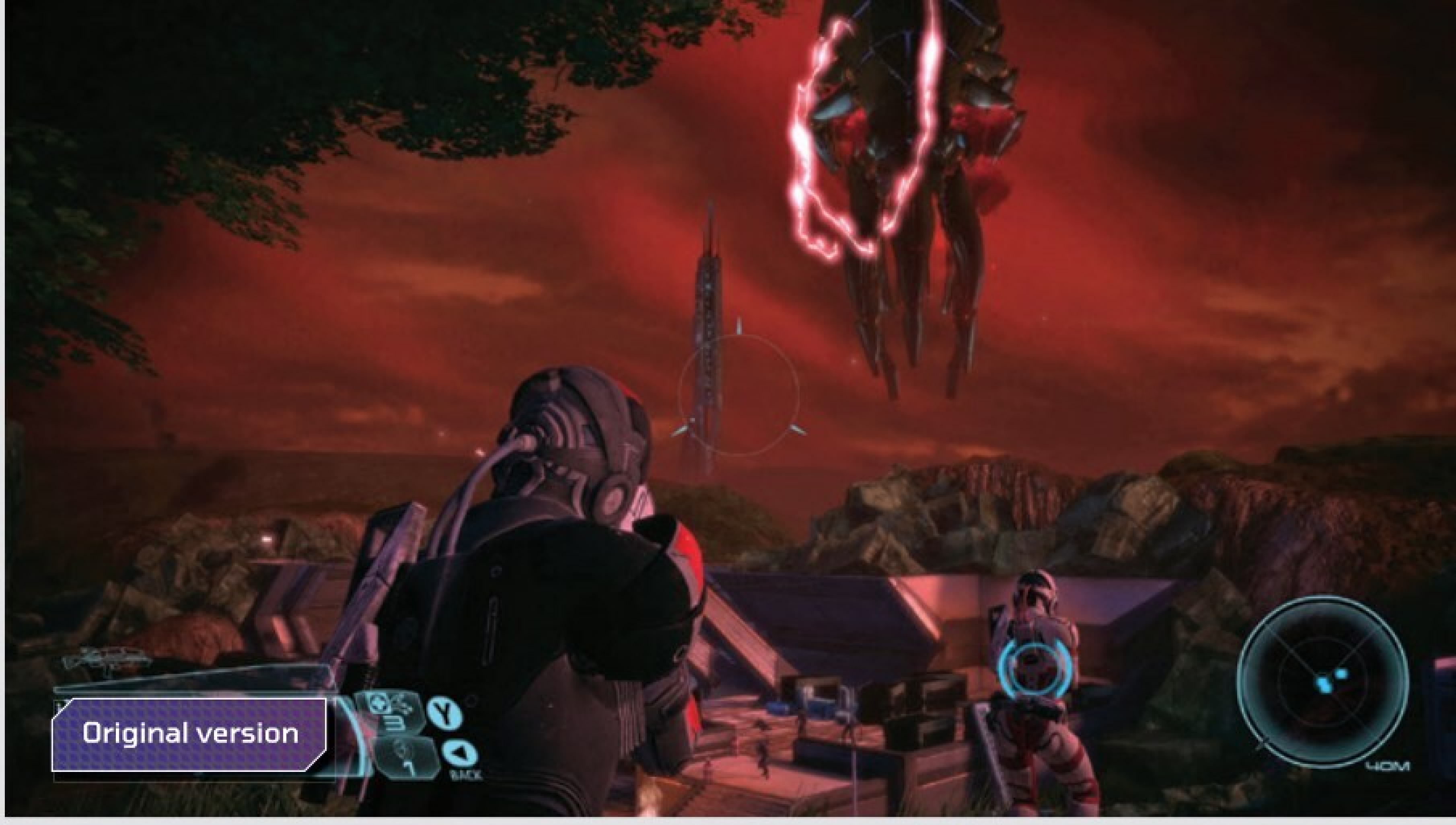
As wild as it is to think about, ME1 came out 14 years ago, and Shepard's story ended about five years later. "This has been quite the archaeological dig," Walters says. "When you resurrect these things, you always hope you did everything right to sort of preserve it, archive it, and make sure it was ready to go. And certainly, if I could go back in time, I would have shaken my finger and said, 'We should have done a better job of that.' There was a lot of just guesswork in the early days [of the remaster]."

WHY A REMASTER AND NOT A REMAKE?

Many series, like Resident Evil and Final Fantasy, have gone beyond merely remastering beloved games, instead remaking them to appeal more to modern audiences. However, BioWare didn't feel like that was the right approach for the trilogy at this point in time. In fact, making it a remaster in the true sense was one thing the team agreed upon early on, before they even really got going.

"This is a beloved franchise," says project director Mac Walters. "If you look at the way fans talk about Shepard, they say, 'My Shepard,' right? They're very possessive about Shepard in a really good, really strong way. And, of course, that doesn't just mean the character Shepard – that means that Shepard's story. It's all the choices that are made along the way. And so, very early on, we realized, 'Look, if the choices and the plot points, if we're gonna say that those are what everyone loves, holds on to, and wants to call it their own in the sense of their memory of this, [a remake] is off the table. We're not changing any of those things. That really pushed us more in the [direction] of just a proper remaster, where it's like, 'I love this game and I want to experience it all again, but I'd really love to play it on my current and future hardware, and I'd like to see it brought up to today's standards.'"

"It was like a Ship of Theseus type thing of, 'How far can you change this before it's not the same as it was," adds lead environmental artist Kevin Meek. "In a remake, you start off with some line in the sand, like this is not the same ship that it used to be. Whereas in a remaster, it's the same toolset, the same level, the same characters, just polished up. That's where I get that nostalgia factor, and I would have definitely lost a lot of that if we'd gone the other way."



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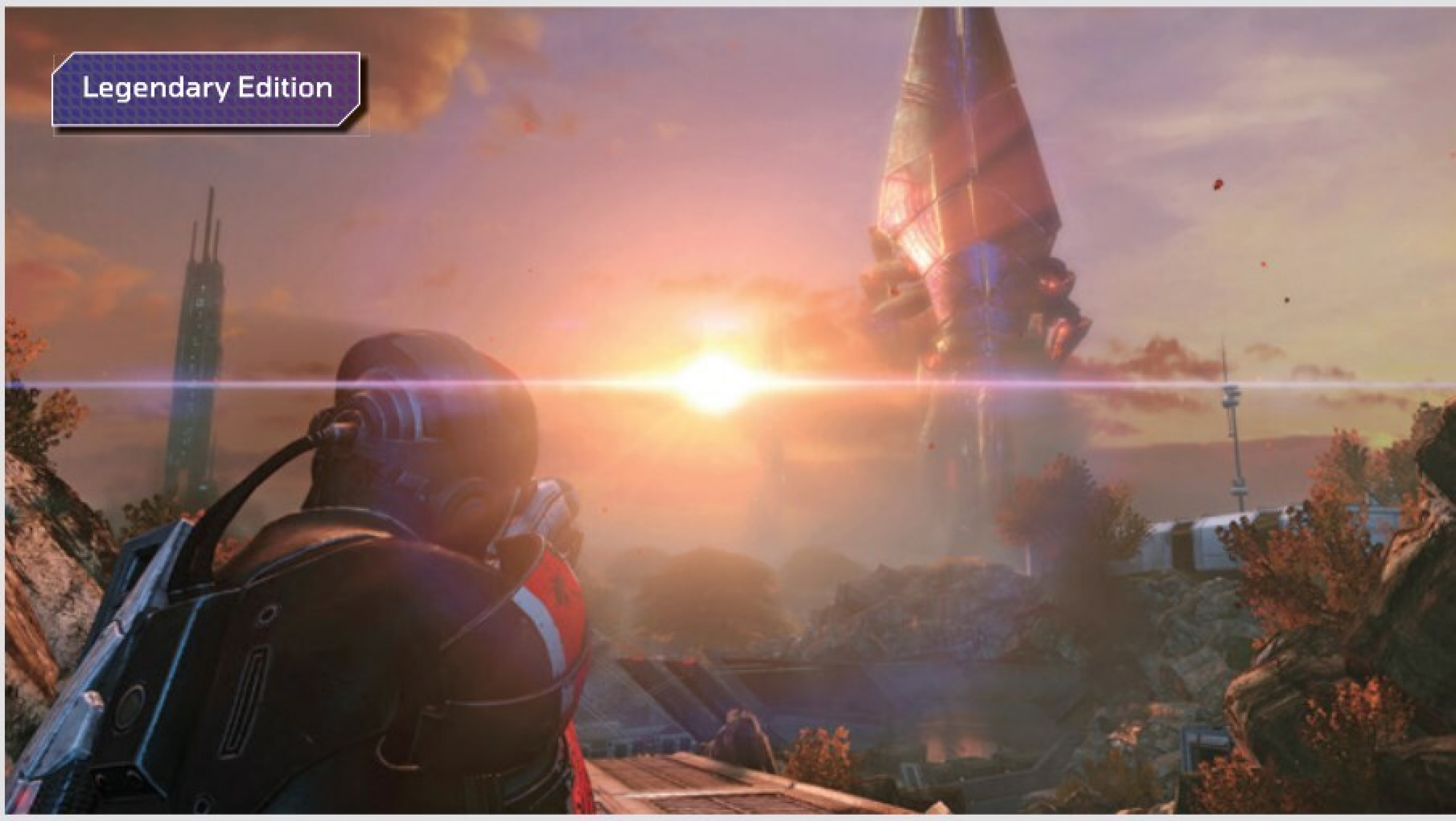


Legendary Edition

Walters and Meek estimated with "napkin math" how many assets were available across the games and what it would take to remaster them if they wanted to touch everything. To say they were a little off, or there were obstacles they couldn't have anticipated, is an understatement. It meant making some tough calls in the end [see Multiplayer sidebar], and having certain things completely off the table, like including any cut content due to it not being archived. Each of the games ran on a different version of the Unreal 3 engine, too. This meant that simply plopping things into the newest version wasn't a simple task, as functions and libraries had changed over time, causing quite a bit of hassle.

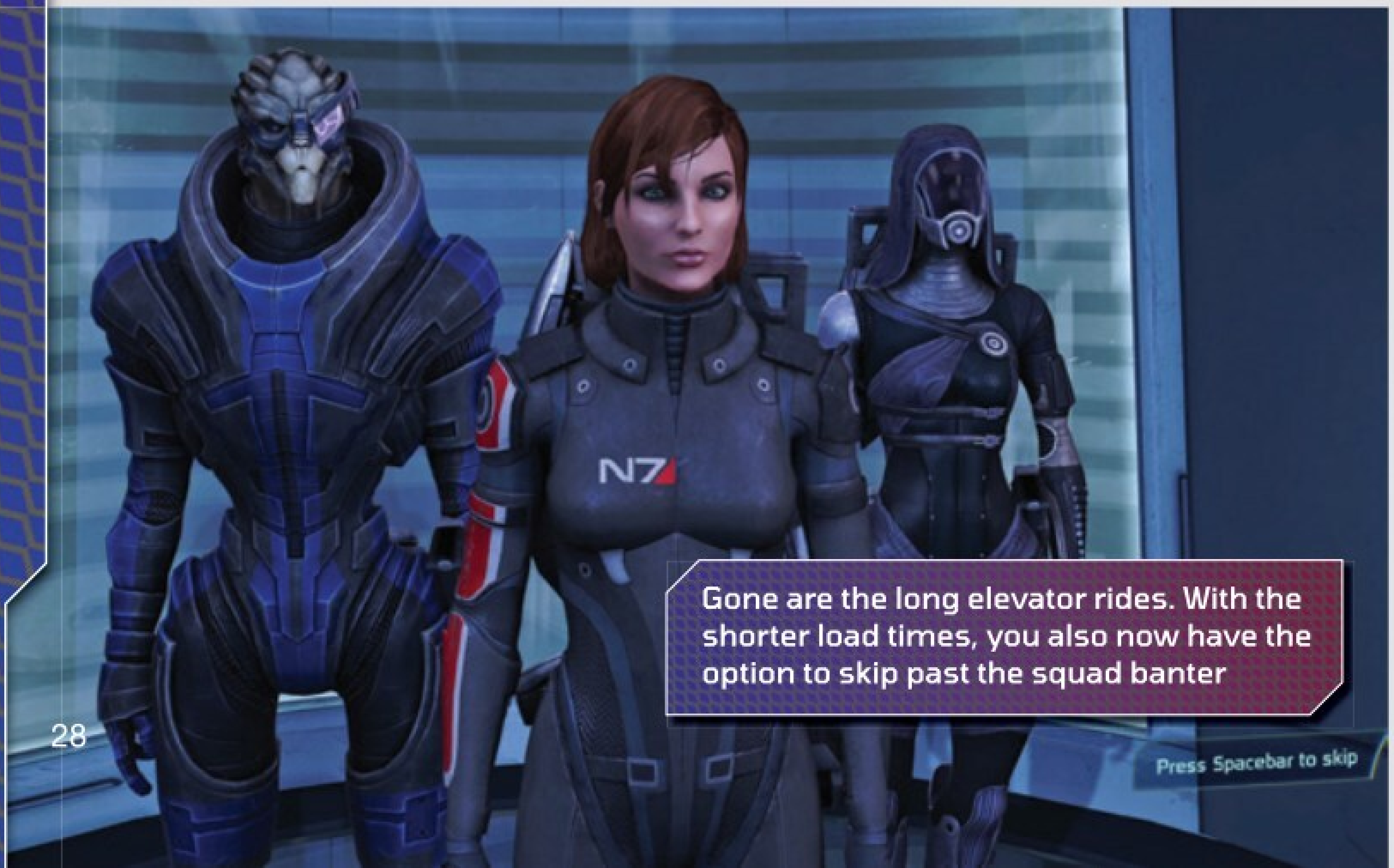
"A lot of in-house tools that we created ourselves or modified to work – the people who created those, they're long gone," Walters says. "And so, you're dependent on either investigating it yourself, hoping there's some form of documentation, or realizing that now as you start to dig into that, you need to rediscover [how to do] all this again."

BioWare took the approach of working backward, starting with Mass Effect 3 and then trying to bring the other entries closer to its level. "Because ME3 was done last, a lot of the assets were the strongest and most recent," Walters explains. "What we tried to do was align around, 'Let's make sure Mass Effect 3 looks great on current gen, in 4K,' all of that. If we want to update the textures and some of the models, that's kind of the starting point. We kept building on [that] foundation and bringing it back down through ME2 and ME1 where appropriate; not wholesale, but just where it was appropriate to do so."

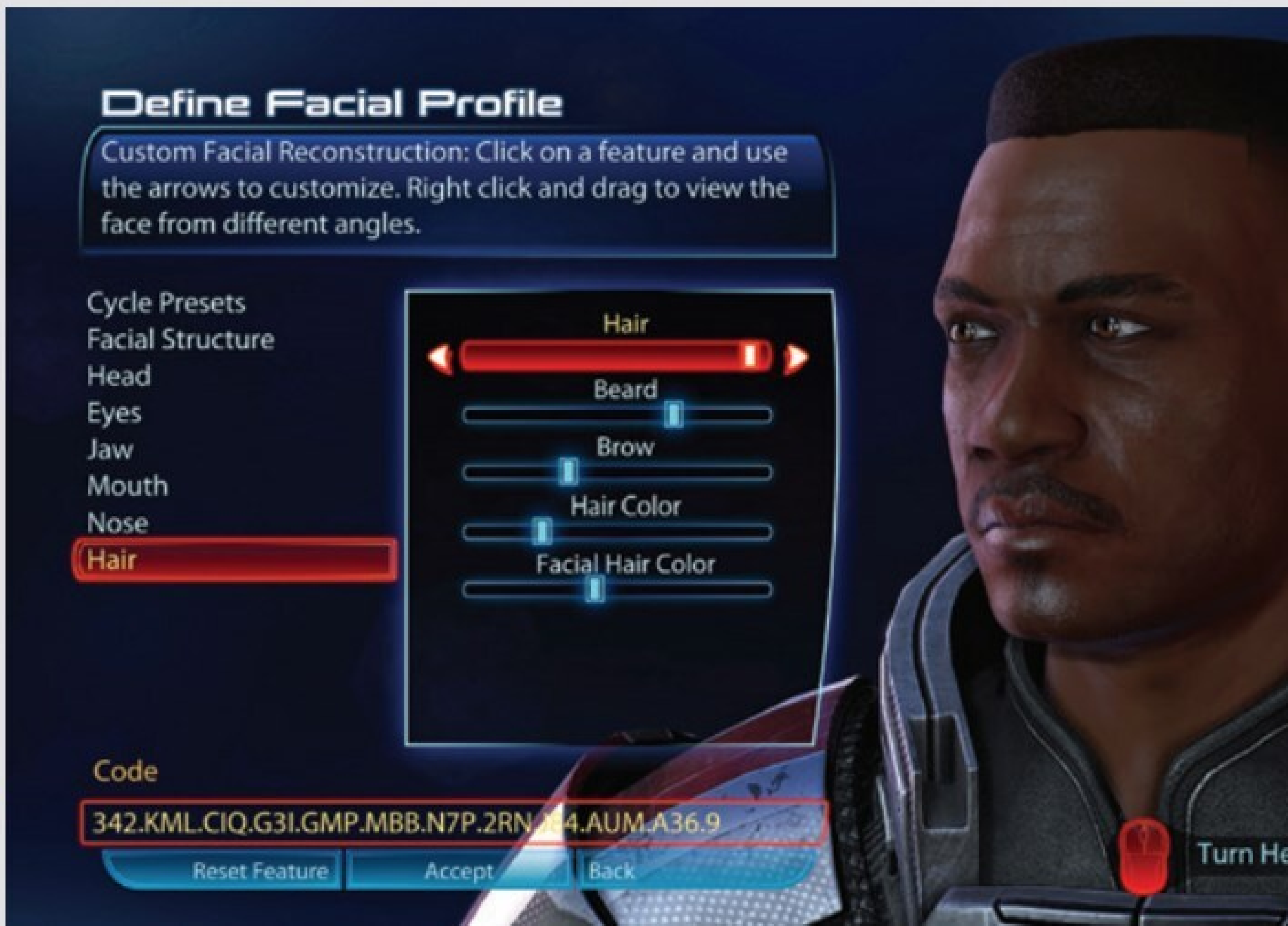
The ultimate goal of the remaster is to unify the experience across the three entries. This doesn't just relate to enhancing the visuals and remastering the trilogy for 4K so there isn't such a visual leap between the three, but also having all the content accessible through a single launcher with a universal character creator across the three games. That last part in particular means that starting with ME1, you will have many more customization options, including the ability to use the box-art FemShep from ME3 as your main avatar.

The enhanced customization options also allow players more freedom in how they build their Shepard. "I think a lot of people weren't able to customize their Shepard in a way that really matched them," Meek says. "Whether you're talking about really limited skin-tone choices, really limited hair choices. There's a lot we have done to make sure that what you do choose as your Shepard at the beginning of the screen of ME1 can be your Shepard throughout the three games, whether that's the iconic female, or having a really dark skin tone with curly hair." We saw firsthand some of the new options, and the hairstyles are far and away the most impressive. Now your Shepard can rock everything from cornrows to a high-top fade to even a Caesar cut, giving more realistic options for making a Shepard of color.

As for the other graphical enhancements, the visuals may initially seem similar to what you remember. However, seeing scene and character comparisons side by side tells a different story, especially the improved lighting, level of detail, and crisper images. "We spend a lot of time talking about upressing with textures, shaders, and the models, but there's a lot of other stuff that goes on top of that ... whether that's tech like subsurface scattering for the skin to make it feel a little bit more alive or ambient occlusion," Meek explains.



Gone are the long elevator rides. With the shorter load times, you also now have the option to skip past the squad banter



Define Facial Profile

Custom Facial Reconstruction: Click on a feature and use the arrows to customize. Right click and drag to view the face from different angles.

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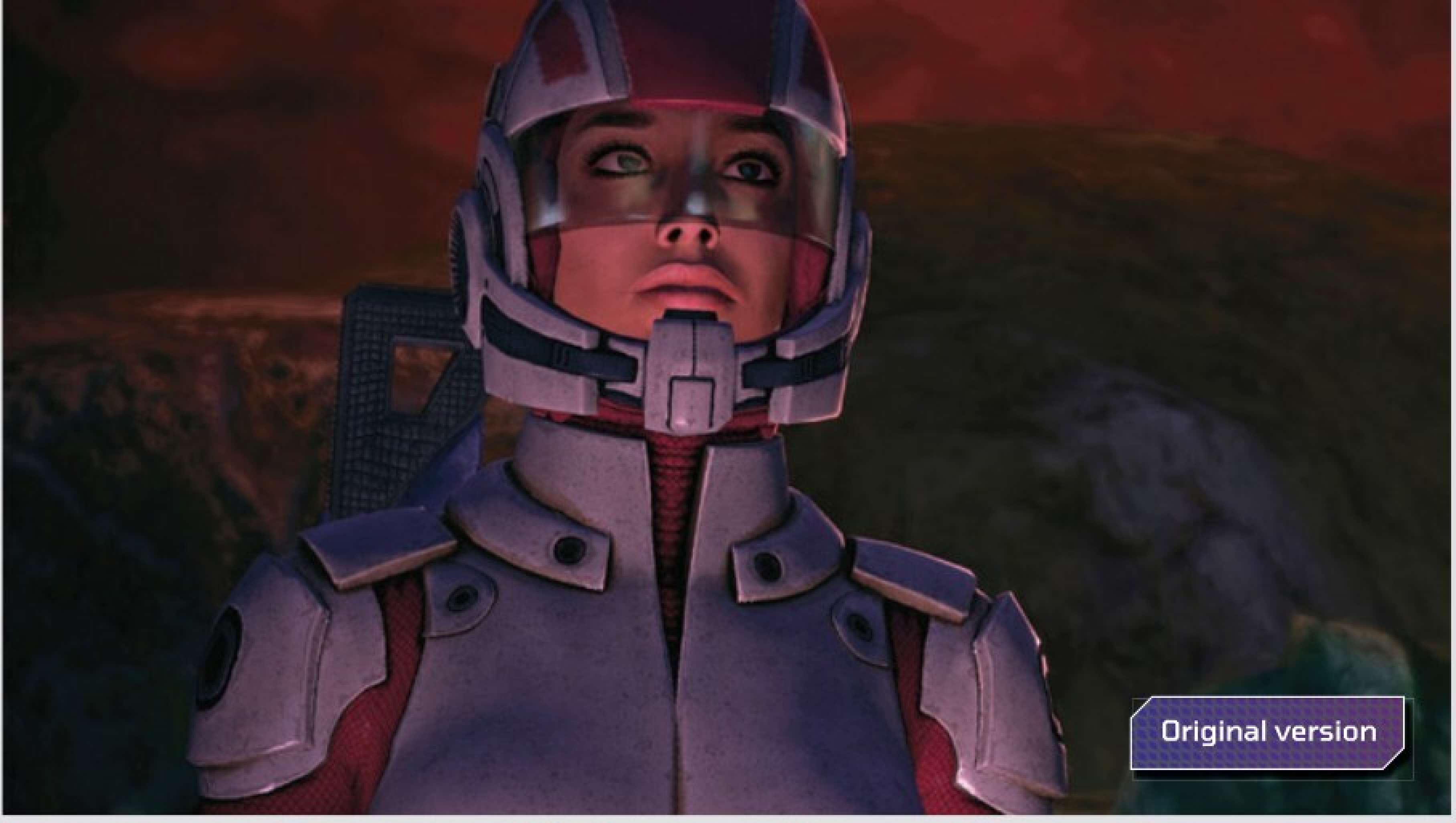
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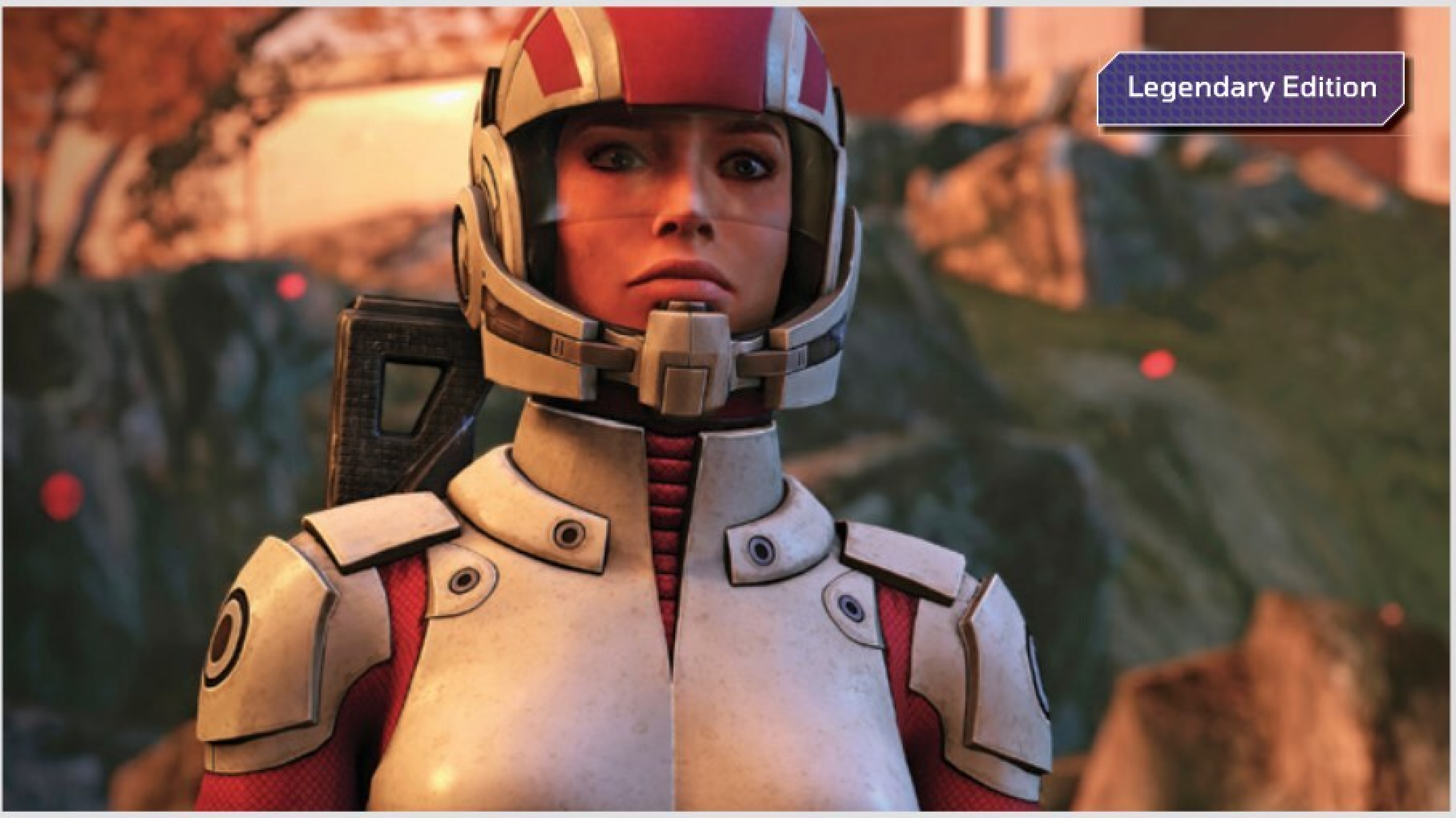
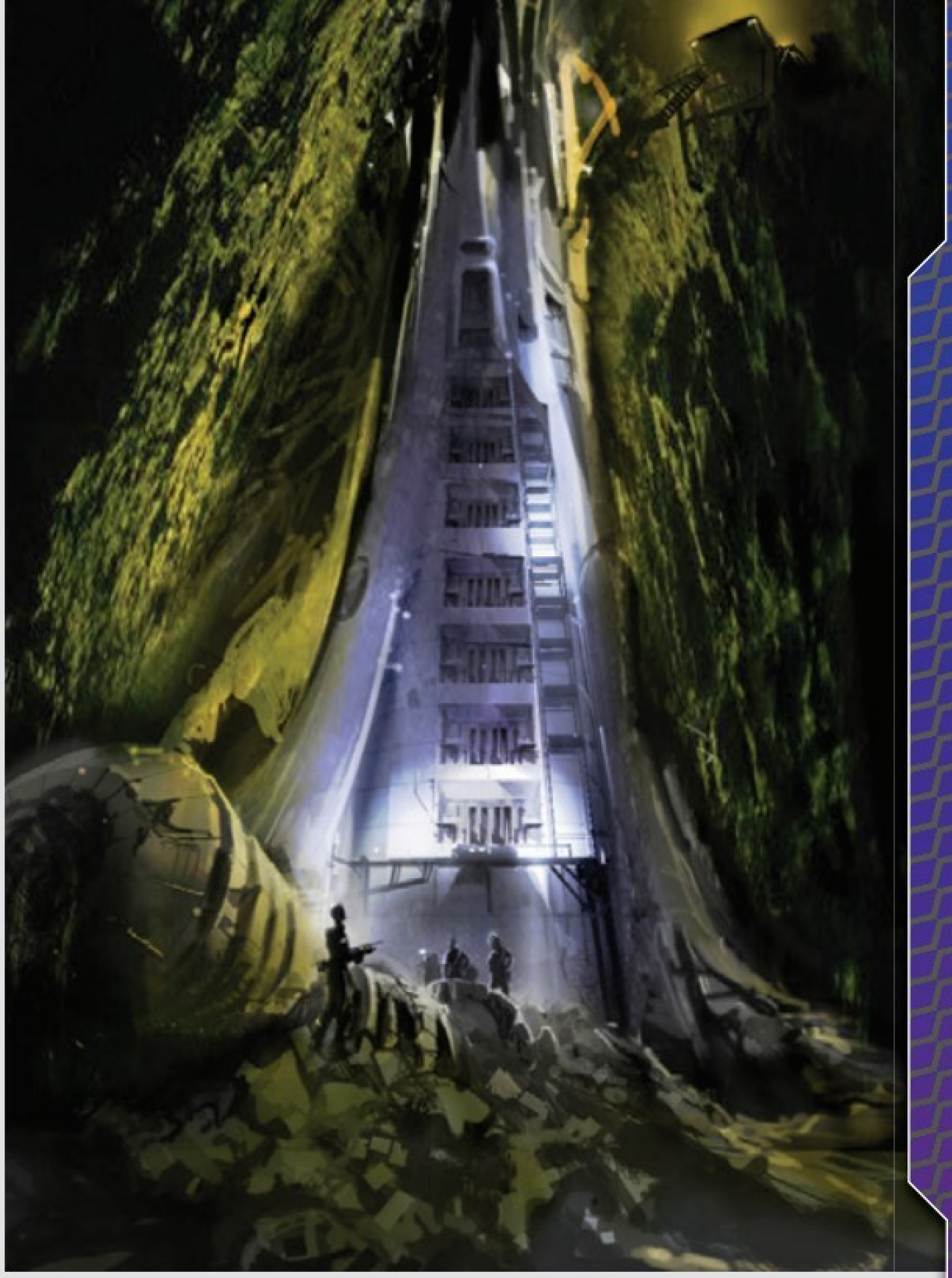
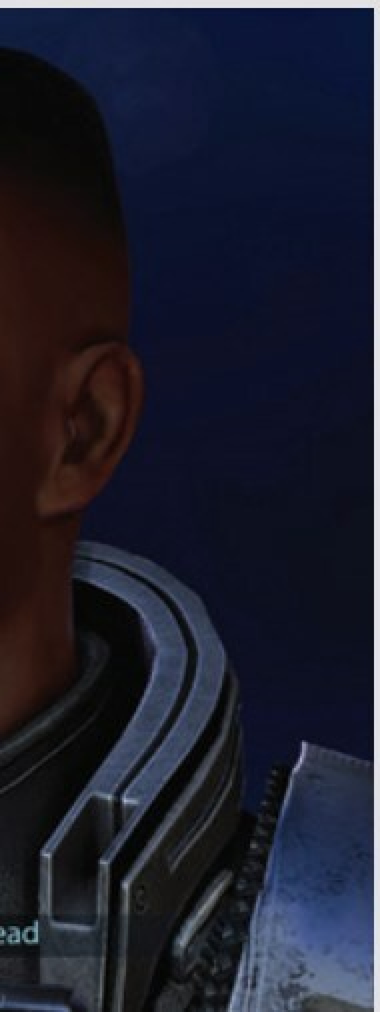

Legendary Edition



However, the team was also careful on how far they took things in their efforts to harmonize the visuals. This is a remaster and not a remake after all, so they didn't want to do anything that would affect canon, especially when adjusting beloved characters' looks through the games. "[We tried] to stay as true to the original as we can to make sure that there is still a sense of progression through the characters that join you through the whole trilogy," Meek says. "It would have been really easy to just copy-paste the Liara from ME3 into ME1, but she goes through quite a character arc, like ME1 Liara is naive and doe-eyed, wearing her medical uniform. By the time she gets to ME3, she's really powerful and confident [in the] Shadow Broker DLC, that type of stuff." Seeing side-by-side comparisons of the squadmates' improved looks shows BioWare stayed true to the originals, but they now have more detailed apparel and armors, complete with shine and folds in the fabric.

ONE OF THESE GAMES IS NOT LIKE THE OTHERS …

ME1 is often referred to as the "black sheep" of the series. It's not because the first entry in the series was a bad game by any stretch, but because it plays very differently than ME2 and ME3. With ME1, it was clear BioWare was still figuring out if the path forward was more of an RPG or shooter, trying to bridge both within its gameplay. It remains a classic, but its age is apparent, giving BioWare plenty of reason to put more effort toward it. It will most likely be the place where you notice the biggest quality-of-life improvements in Legendary Edition.



From simple fan requests like a dedicated melee button and removing class-based weapon restrictions, to more noticeable upgrades like a modernized HUD and unified control scheme, BioWare answered the call. A big area BioWare couldn't leave untouched was the first game's shooting mechanics, improving them to be smoother in the heat of the battle. Aim assist ensures that you can get easier access to your targets, whether it's by making the reticule stickier when you move it over foes or snapping aim to them when you strafe. "In ME1, you were still rolling dice in the background to a degree, and that can be frustrating," Walters says. "I think we've all probably experienced that, like you've lined up with a sniper [rifle] in ME1 [for] the headshot and you missed. It's like, 'How did I miss?' [We tried] to eliminate those kinds of moments."

WHY MASS EFFECT 3'S MULTIPLAYER ISN'T INCLUDED

Mass Effect 3 introduced multiplayer to the series to great fanfare, but it won't be returning for Legendary Edition. It wasn't an easy decision, but the team felt their efforts were better spent on the star attraction: Commander Shepard's story and your experience through it.

"It would have been really hard," says project lead Mac Walters. "In the sense of getting all the online systems working and functioning and all of that, it would have been another large chunk of, 'Okay, something has to give if we do that, like quite a bit.' Then you also run into just a lot of the other logistics. The economy is built completely differently, so then what are we going to do with that? And do we support it post launch? What about people who are still playing multiplayer today? Do we try to find a way to somehow do cross-play between their PS3 and their PS4? And what about all the effort that they put into that? How do we reward them? Again, these aren't unsolvable problems by any stretch, but you have to pick your battles. Ultimately, we said that 'My Shepard' story for the majority of fans is going to fit in within the single-player elements of the game, and we really wanted to focus on those and do as much with them as we could and really lift them as high as we could."

The camera in the first game has also been adjusted to help ease frustrations. "ME1 had a terrible habit of sort of mapping one-to-one to your character," Walters explains. "If you popped up on some geometry … it didn't smoothly interpolate as you moved around. It was very janky, so we fixed that."

The team also went back and looked at which encounters needed extra attention, such as the brutal Benezia fight. The asari biotic not only had high shields and health, but also summoned waves of reinforcements and used her deadly gunfire and biotic powers when you got in her line of sight. "We added more autosaves, so at least if you do die, you can come back to it a little bit more quickly," Walters says. "But then we also just did things where a lot of her powers can't ragdoll you as much, and [changed] how we spawned some of the enemies and the way that you can react to them, just so that it was less of a frustrating fight – but still challenging." The fight's layout remains intact, but it also has wider areas for more cover.

And don't worry: The Mako, one of the biggest thorns in people's sides, has also received some love. Everyone has not-so-fond memories of driving ME1's six-wheeled vehicle, whether you were struggling with finicky steering controls or molasses-slow movement. BioWare made handling it a much more realistic and less irritating drive. The Mako now has a speed boost, camera shake, better aiming for shooting, updated physics, and an alternate control scheme (movement can now be camera-centric or Mako-centric, like its original incarnation).

Another key place the team focused on was ME1's levels, which contained a lot of open space and limited detail, especially compared to the other two games. "The footprints of every level are quite large, but they're also somewhat sparse," Walters explains. "Part of that was the beauty of it – going out and finding these locations that had that sort of stark beauty to them. But at the same time, you couldn't also help but feel like they could be a little bit more fleshed out."

To solve this problem, the team did level paintovers, which transformed these barren areas into more striking locales. This wasn't about adding new things to do in levels, but breathing new life into them by manipulating lighting, fog, or particle effects, or adding increased vegetation. The comparisons between the old and new levels were by far the most exciting and promising enhancements we saw. BioWare says they won't all be dramatic, but one that really stuck out was Eden Prime. "One issue you get with Eden Prime in the [original] version is it lands you down on the planet, and you'd be looking 180 degrees away from the path you need to follow out over this vista and you can see the sun," Meek explains. "From that point on, you turn around, and the sun's behind you the entire rest of the level, and everything is in shadow and everything is flat."

One easy change the team made was flipping the sun 180 degrees, so it's in front of you, and it makes all the difference. "Now you're walking into these things, and you have the dynamic volumetric god rays coming off, which is tech that only existed in ME3 that we stole," Meek explains further. "This is also, if you remember, the place where Sovereign's taking off in the background. So like, what does he do when he's silhouetted against the sun?" It gave the developers plenty of ways to get creative and make these levels feel new and exciting again.

CONFRONT THE REAPERS, SAVE THE GALAXY

The Mass Effect trilogy holds a special place in the hearts of many, and its legacy is well deserved. The Legendary Edition ensures it will live on. As we look at many upcoming games we're anticipating in this issue *Game Informer*, Mass Effect Legendary Edition was an emblematic pick as our featured game. Whether you're a seasoned Shepard player who knows every difficult choice intimately or a newbie to the delights of the N7 hero's motivating speeches and bad dancing, it's worth confronting the Reapers and seeing how one of video games' favorite heroes made their mark. As a bonus, the game is also compatible with new-gen consoles via backwards compatibility.

The passion for the series isn't lost on BioWare, and the team put a few things in just for the fans to uncover. "We've had opportunities to put in Easter eggs, but they're not like anything that would change canons or suddenly rewrite how the game works," Walters says. "It was just more little fun things that the team wanted to put in here and there." Isn't that what the Mass Effect trilogy is about? Finding those fun moments as you take on the world. ◆

For more about BioWare's journey to make the Mass Effect remaster a reality, head to gameinformer.com/melegendary

THE QUEST FOR PINNACLE STATION DLC

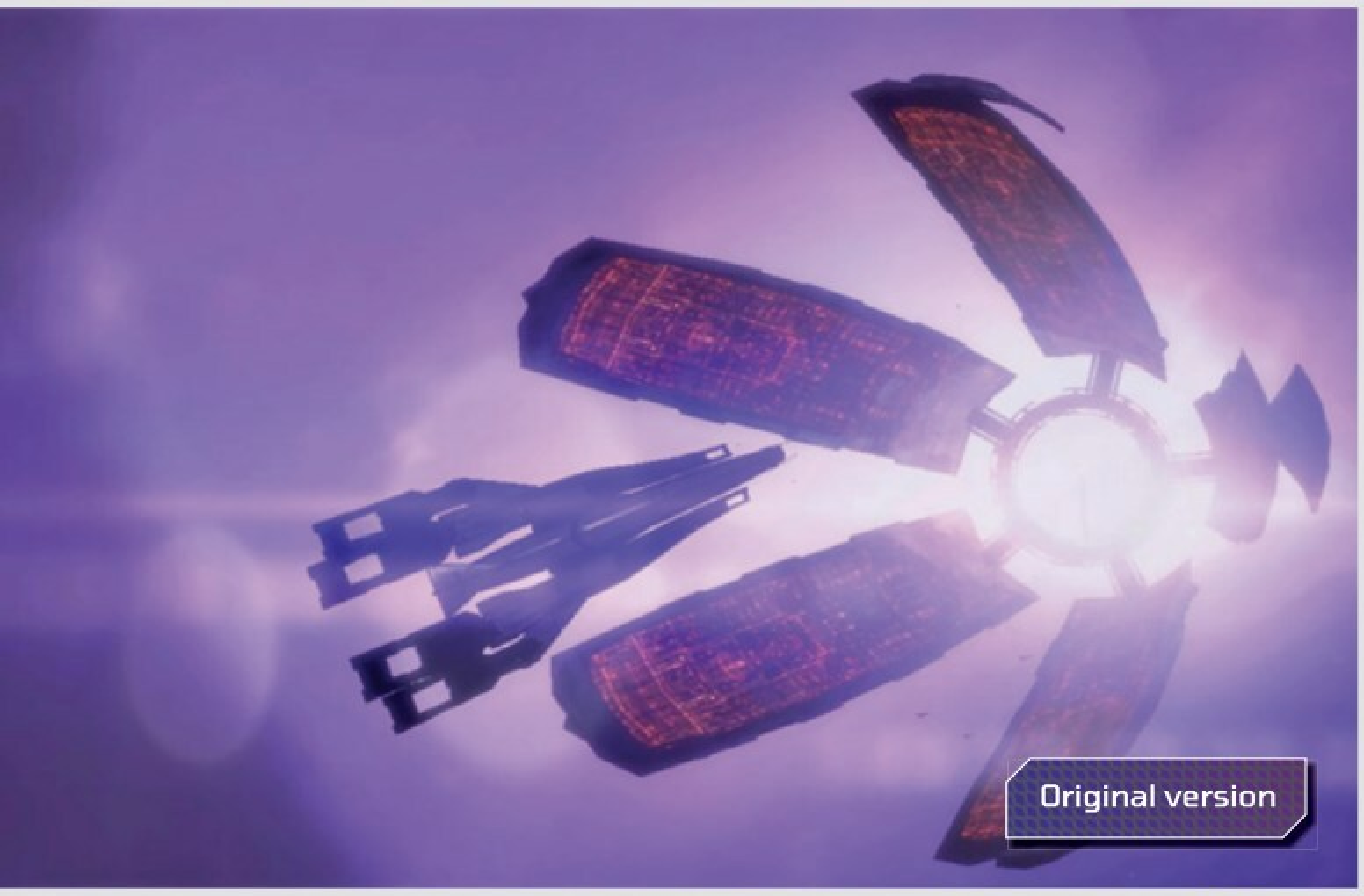
The Mass Effect Legendary Edition includes over 40 pieces of DLC, which contain all the story content, such as the popular Citadel and Lair of the Shadow Broker add-ons, alongside promo weapon and armor packs. You can access this content just like you would if you had added it into your collection. "Imagine it like you had all the DLC available and downloaded it all – that would be your experience," says project director Mac Walters. However, you might notice one DLC in particular is missing.

Pinnacle Station, which added a unique training facility to the galaxy map, was the second DLC for Mass Effect. It was included when the trilogy made its way to PC, but fans were disappointed when the source code was lost, making it unable to come to the PS3 port. In the DLC, you competed to prove your prowess in 13 high-stakes combat scenarios to earn some amazing weapons and armors to use in the main game.

For Legendary Edition, the team went on what project director Mac Walters calls "an emotional roller coaster" to try to include it, tracking down everyone they could at EA to see if it was merely on a hard drive somewhere. They got their hopes up when someone was able to get in touch with original developer Demiurge Studios. The studio had backups and sent them over on a thumb drive; the files were massive in size. For six weeks, the team sorted through it as they were working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but they only found more disappointment: corrupted files and missing links.

If Pinnacle Station is ever to be revived, it will have to be by way of a remake. Walters said the team entertained the notion, even watching videos of it online to get ideas on how to recreate it, but it was just too big of an investment to pull off. "It would basically take us another full six months just to do this with most of the team we've got," Walters says. "I wish we could do it. Honestly, just because this is meant to be everything that the team ever created, brought together again – all the single-player content. And so, leaving it all on the cutting-room floor, it was heartbreaking."

Mass Effect Legendary runs at 60 frames per second on PS4 Pro and Xbox One X. The FPS is uncapped on PC and next-gen consoles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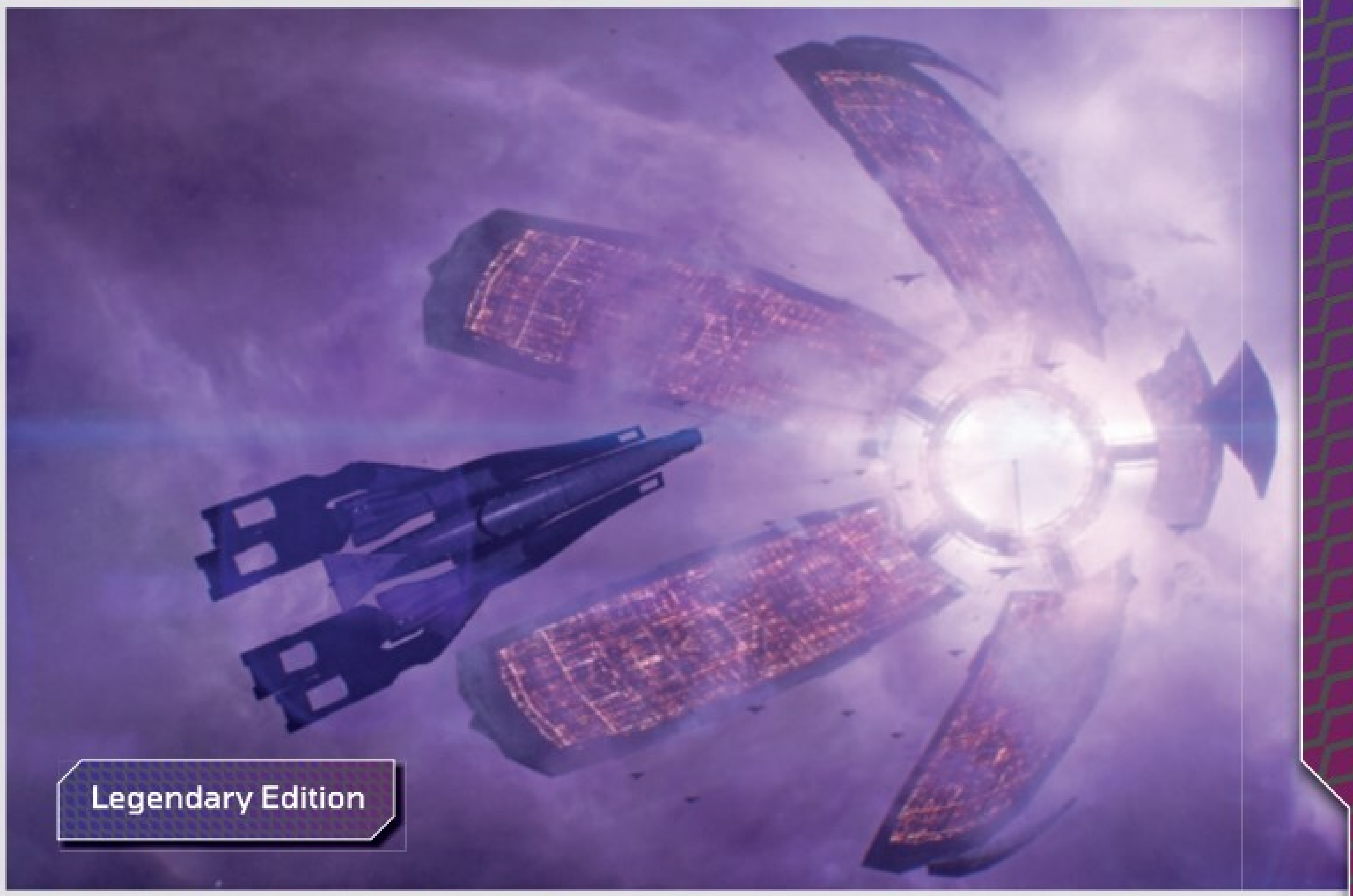
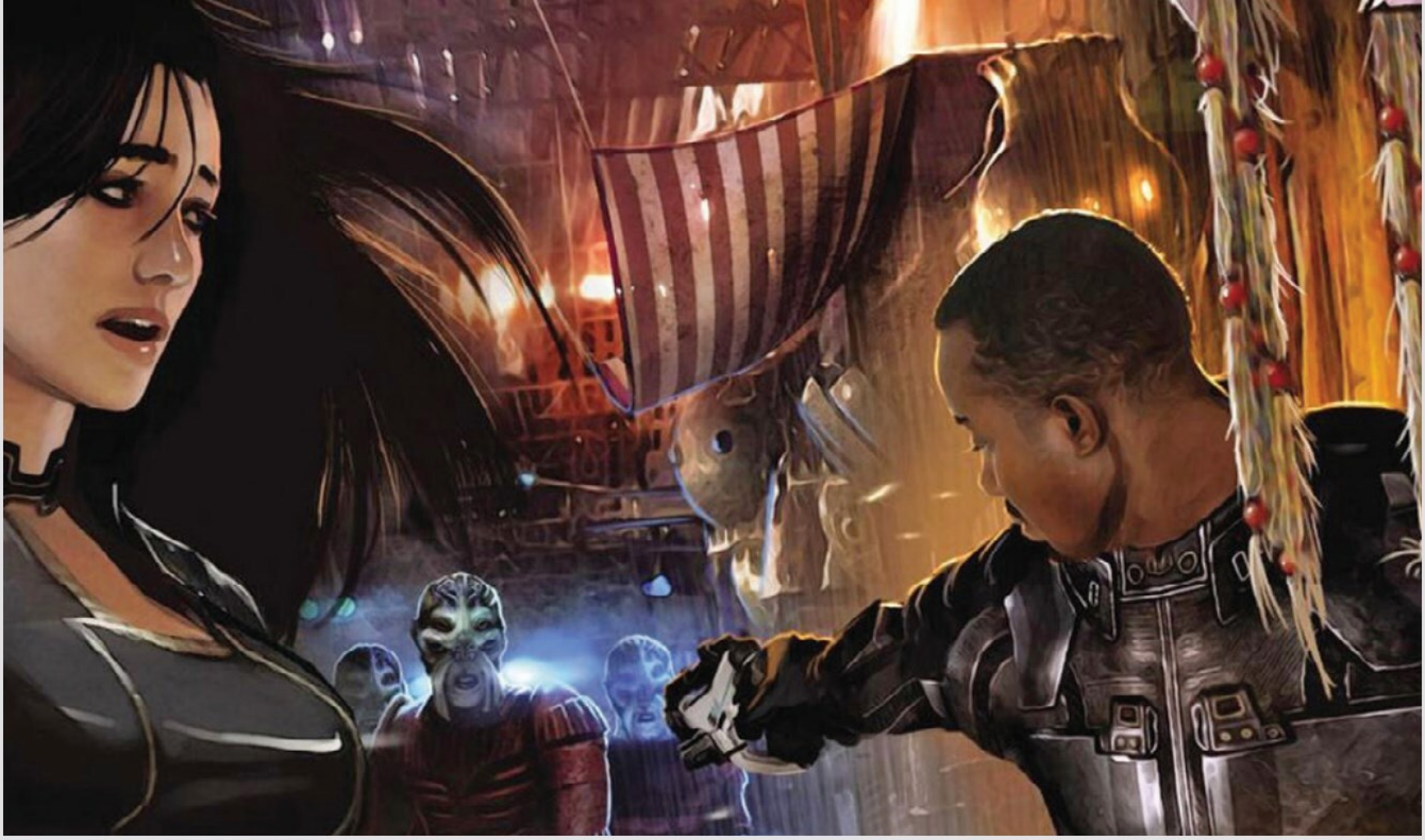

Legendary Edition

Minor but welcome changes, such as reducing frequency and difficulty of minigames, litter the remaster

MASS EFFECT'S EXPANDED LORE

BY LIANA RUPPERT

The Mass Effect universe is expansive, but what some may not realize is that the lore doesn't stop with the games. Comics, novels, and even an animated movie all work in tandem to flesh out an incredibly intricate universe far beyond the confines of the gaming series. With the Legendary Edition remaster on the way, there is much for both franchise newcomers and loyal N7 fans to be excited for. And it's an excitement that can be further celebrated with the extended lore of the galaxy.



The Mass Effect games are expanded upon to an impressive degree with the comics published by Dark Horse, filling in the blank spaces in between each release. With Mass Effect 2, fans watched in horror as their own Commander Shepard heroically sacrificed themselves for the safety of their crew. Following Shepard's last breath, a span of two years passed before they were resurrected by Cerberus; a human terrorist organization that spirals in depravity with its aims of putting humanity first. But how did Shepard's body, and life itself, become Cerberus' concern? The very first comic in the Mass Effect extended universe is called *Redemption*, and it follows Liara's quest to recover Shepard and offer them a second lease on life for the sake of the galaxy. It's here that fans first meet Feron, the drell that betrayed her only to help her in her journey, a debt she repays later in Mass Effect 2 with the Shadowbroker DLC.

Following the release of *Redemption*, 11 comics have expanded upon the massive universe that is Mass Effect. From exploring the mercenary roots of Jack Harper before he transformed into the Illusive Man and head of Cerberus with *Evolution*, to exploring smaller stories like Aria's first run-in with the Collectors; there are so many tales untold that the comics explore, making the bigger picture even grander.

Mass Effect: Foundation is arguably one of my personal favorites due to its ties to the third game's Citadel DLC. *Foundation* is made up of 13 parts with three volumes, each tying into the DLC while also exploring the backstories of even more squadmates like Thane and a much younger Kaidan Alenko and the horrors he faced while being a student at Jump Zero. The first volume also offers an interesting character to learn more about: Rasa. Rasa is a mysterious agent of the Illusive Man, a character we meet (and fight) later in the Citadel DLC. With this as the focal point, the series follows the Cerberus operative's task of exploring those events in the lives of Urdnot Wrex, Ashley Williams, Kaidan, and others to learn about what made them who they are when we meet them in the games.

There are also four novels that focus on the trilogy, with three additional books detailing more of the Andromeda universe. In *Mass Effect: Revelation*, fans learn more about David Anderson and Kahlee Sanders' developing relationship, something that was alluded to a few times throughout the games, and how the Alliance man came to loathe the turian spectre Saren, a character who acted as a villainous catalyst in Mass Effect 1.

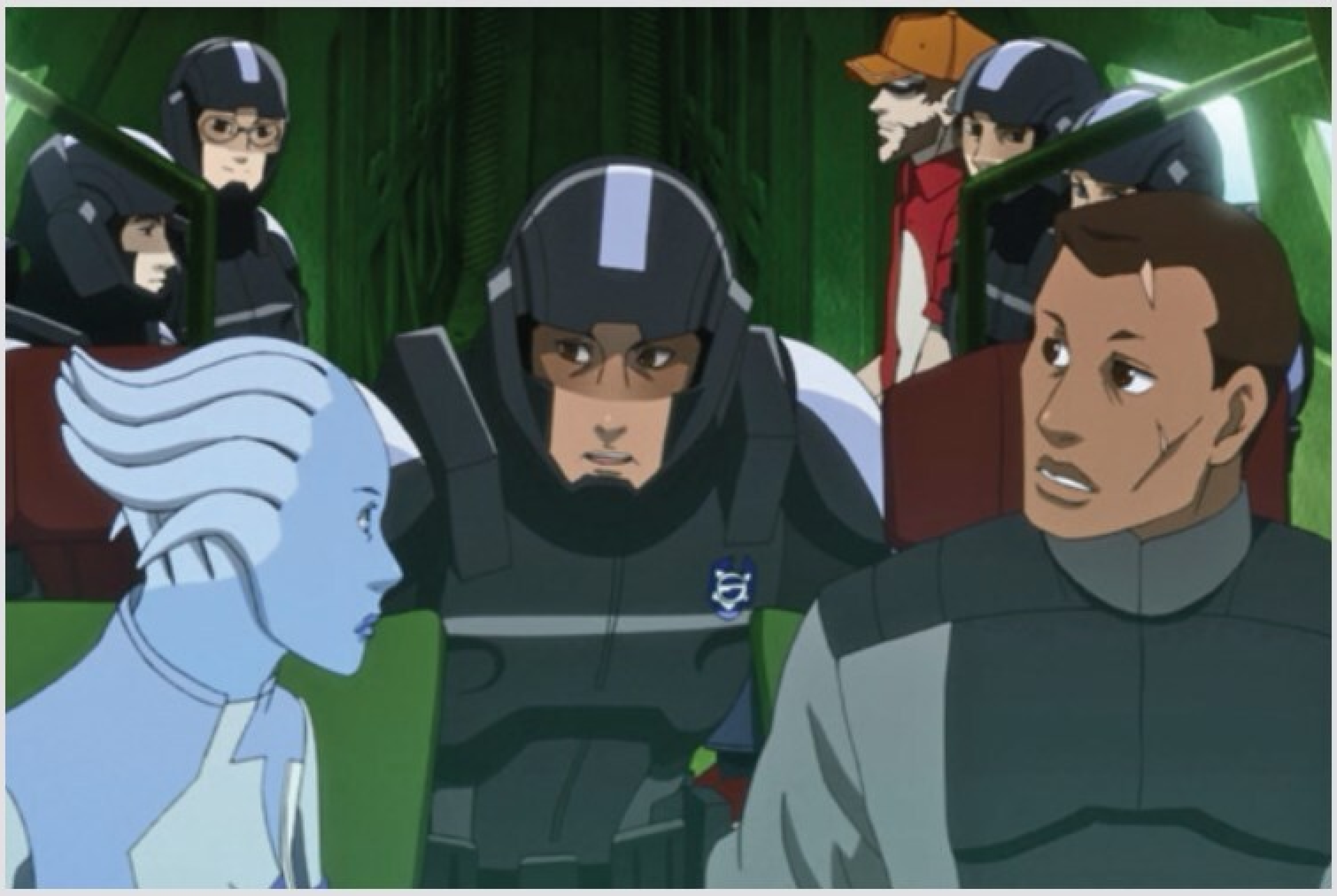
From *Revelation*, the books further delve into stories surrounding Cerberus, such as the biotic prodigy Gillian Grayson and her escape from the organization's clutches, as well as *Retribution* and *Deception* that follow more tales about the Illusive Man's growing influence.

With the Andromeda expanded media, the books themselves explain what happened to the arks as the various races made their disastrous way toward a new home, including what happened to the Quarians and more about Cora Harper and her past with Papa Ryder prior to deployment.

The games themselves are impressive, with thorough worldbuilding and characters that feel like family. The expanded media takes what I love about the BioWare tale and tells it in a way that feels real and fully realized.

Books and comics not your thing? There is also an animated movie called *Paragon Lost* that dives deep into what happened to a pre-Shepard James Vega and how he learned the hard way that the mission comes first – always – with his first encounter with the Collectors at the Reapers' behest.

If you love Mass Effect or are looking to dive into this wonderful fandom, I can't recommend the expanded lore of the franchise enough. With the original writing team penning these extended tales, the spirit of Mass Effect is vibrant, whole, and ever expanding as we look to what's next. ◆



50 GAMES WE CAN'T WAIT TO PLAY

A

After a tumultuous year, it's natural to come into 2021 hungry for new opportunities. The gaming industry is offering no shortage of those on the horizon, with dozens of promising games to look forward to playing, many of which aim to leverage the capabilities of new systems like the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S.

As the new year gets under way, we polled our editorial team to discover the games each of us are most anticipating. We've gathered 50 of the most enthusiastic responses in the pages ahead. From small indie projects with big ambitions to massive sequels set to define the stakes of this new generation of hardware, the promise of gaming in 2021 and beyond is especially exciting.

Across the breadth of games we're highlighting here, we're thrilled about the potential of all of them, but we've opened up additional space for some by virtue of recent new information and access.

And beyond the 50 entries, watch for additional sidebars on several games that are simply too far out to know concrete details, along with others you can play in early access right now.

by Game Informer Staff

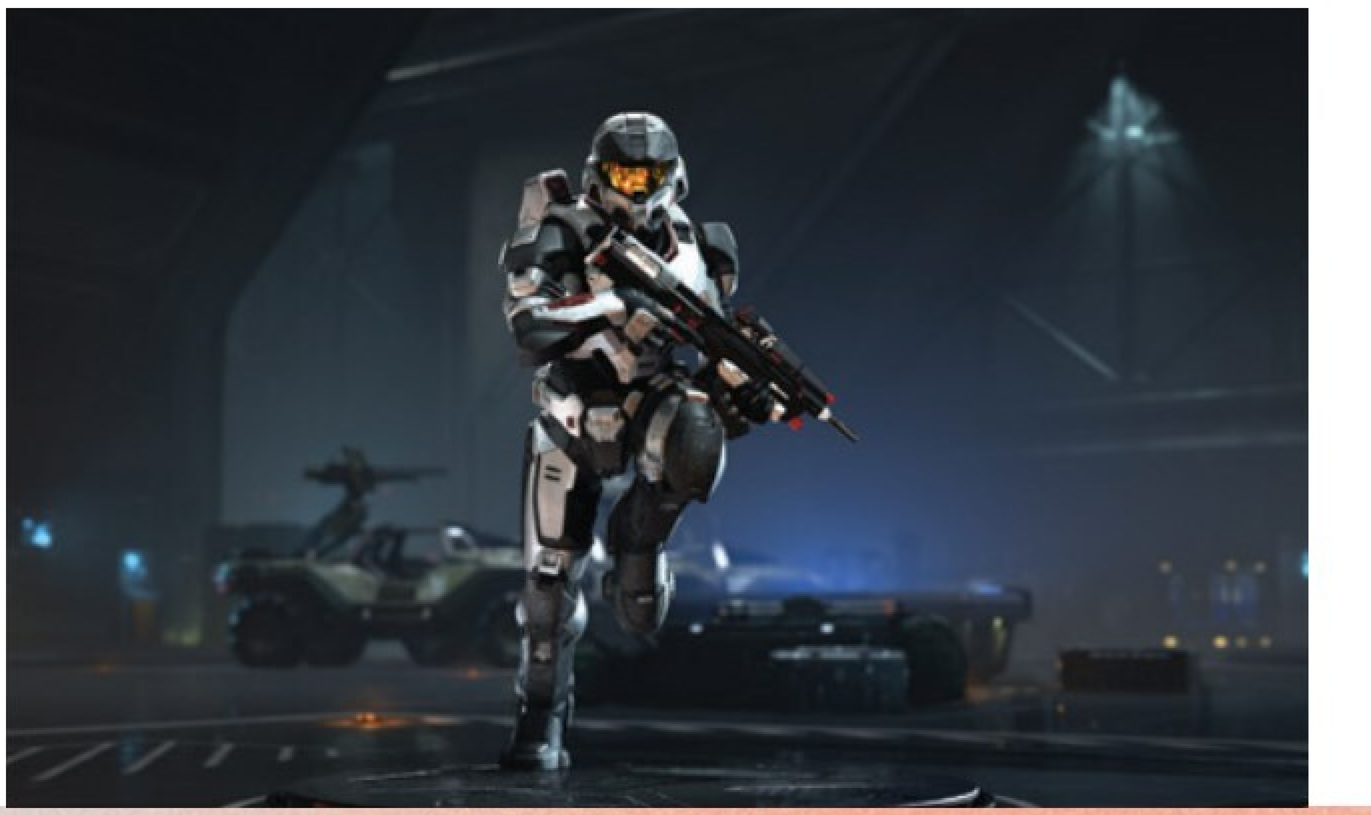
Halo Infinite

Another year, another shot

Platform Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, PC **Style** 1-Player Shooter (Multiplayer TBA) **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios
Developer 343 Industries **Release** Fall

It's always hard when an anticipated game gets pushed from its release window. That's doubly true when the game in question is meant to be the flagship launch title for a new console. That's exactly the scenario that played out with Halo Infinite; its absence from the Xbox Series X/S launch may have had profound implications for the new console generation. However, as a longtime Halo fan who has felt increasingly distant from the franchise in recent years, I was pleased to hear that the game was getting another year of development.

After a July 2020 gameplay reveal failed to meet many fans' expectations, Halo Infinite has since been delayed to this coming fall. In addition, veteran Halo developer Joseph Staten has taken the wheel as creative director to guide the ship over the coming months. Based on 343 Industries' communications, it's clear that the team is focusing on two goals: continuing to improve and polish the presentation to meet expectations for new-gen hardware, and simultaneously staying rooted in the storytelling style, art direction, and gameplay feel that help make it feel like a true Halo game to longtime players.



Of all the features announced thus far, it's the promised exploration of a full new Halo ring that has me most excited. A dedicated tacmap seems to indicate an array of conflict points, discoveries, and secrets to explore, and I like the sense of freedom that engenders. "Do I explore off the golden path?" Staten asked in a recent game update. "Assault that Banished war base guarding the valley pass? Follow a flight of Forerunner Sentinels into that unexpected cavern? Rescue a squad of marines dug in and desperate halfway up that mountain?" That sense of discovery has always been teased, but never fully realized in a Halo game; I'm hopeful that this entry finally nails it.

Beyond opportunities for exploration, several concrete plans aim to dramatically improve the graphical presentation. Character fidelity is getting a major overhaul, along with foliage and tree rendering, indirect lighting, and global illumination and dynamic time-of-day technology, among many other tweaks. Problems with level-of-detail popping and texture quality are being addressed. On a broader level, the team is also focusing on finding the difficult balance between new-gen expectations and the clean and simple visual forms that characterized early games in the series. In my mind, striking that chord is essential in a long-running franchise like Halo.

We have also started to get some early insights into the forthcoming multiplayer offering. Halo Infinite's multiplayer experience is free-to-play. While 343 Industries acknowledges that some premium cosmetics are planned as purchasable, the team is also insistent that many customization tools will be earnable in-game. And Halo Infinite will feature no loot boxes, randomness, or items that affect the gameplay. That's heartening to hear, and a promise I dearly hope the developer stands by.

Like most fans, I was crestfallen that Halo Infinite didn't arrive before this last holiday season. But there's no doubt in my mind that the game is well served by more time in the oven. 343 Industries may not have shaken up the launch window of the new consoles, but I'm crossing my fingers that the added time makes this the Halo entry that can reignite my passion for the series.
– Matt Miller

Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga

A newer hope

Platform PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC **Style** 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Warner Bros. Games **Developer** TT Games **Release** 2021

Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker may have ended an era for fans of space fantasy, but adventures within that universe are far from over. TT Games made a name for itself with its popular series of Lego games, starting with – appropriately enough – its take on the original Star Wars trilogy. Now that the Skywalker Saga is complete, the studio behind their whimsical game adaptations is circling back for an all-new pass on the characters, places, and events that generations of us grew up enjoying.

The Skywalker Saga isn't a remaster or even a remake of the previous Star Wars games. While they still draw inspiration and story beats from the same films, the team is designing new levels and gameplay sequences to retell those familiar tales. The Lego games definitely have similarities between them, but the games have become more polished and sophisticated over the years – particularly compared to those released on the original Xbox. As such, I'm excited to see how big moments like the assault on the Death Star or the battle on Hoth play out.

And while the Skywalker Saga focuses on the mainline film entries, spinoffs like *The Mandalorian*, *Rogue One*, and *Solo* will be represented via DLC character packs. And, perhaps because the team knows that every generation seems to have "their" Star Wars trilogy, fans can hop into any of the game's nine levels, whether you want to check out the original trilogy, prequels, or most recent installments. Who am I kidding? I'll be smiling my way through all of them. ***– Jeff Cork***

Kena: Bridge Of Spirits

A gorgeous new adventure

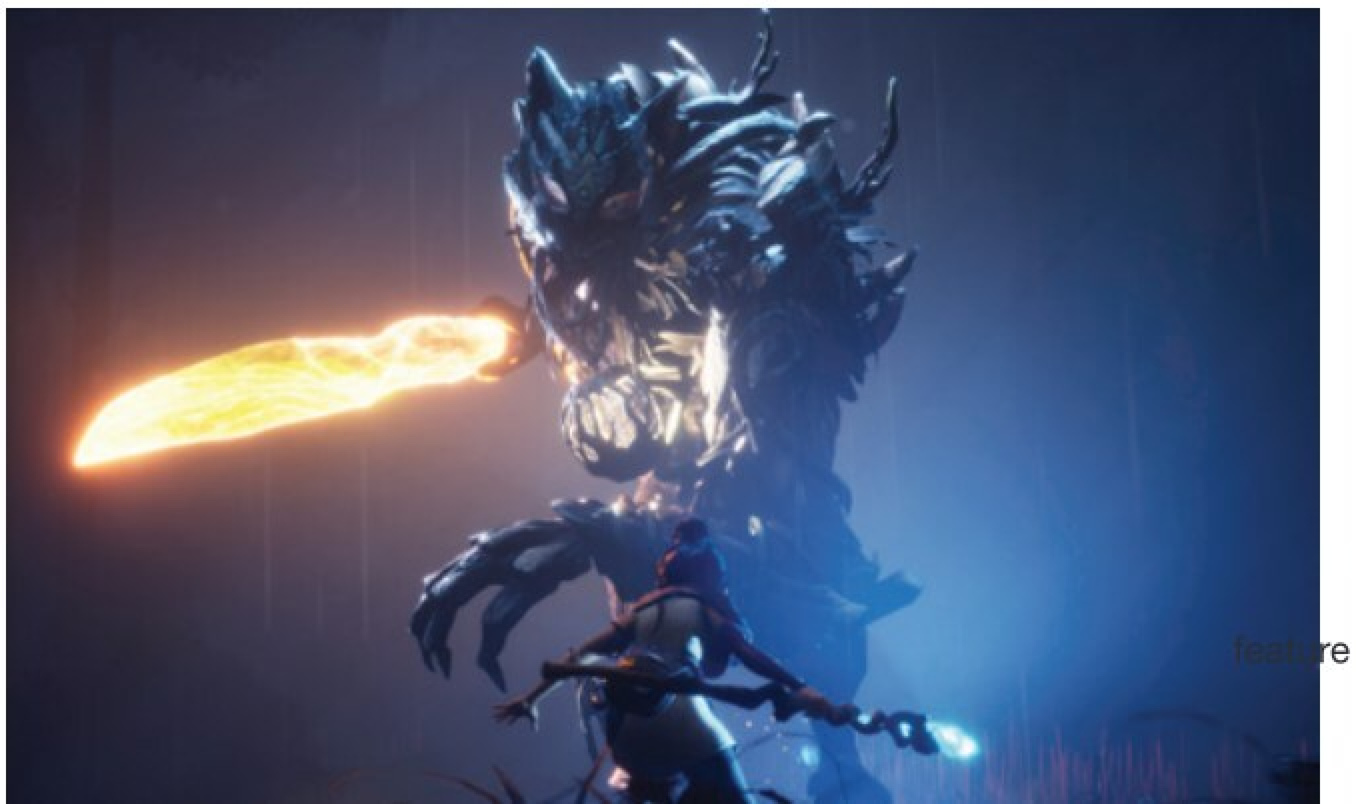
Platform PS5, PS4, PC **Style** 1-Player Action **Publisher** Ember Lab **Developer** Ember Lab **Release** March 2021

Kena: Bridge of Spirits stood out during its reveal at Sony's first PlayStation 5 showcase – so much so that we ended up putting it on our cover a few months ago. Within that story, we shared how Ember Lab is using its experience as an FX and animation studio in a new role as full-fledged game developers. Since then, my enthusiasm and anticipation for the game has only grown.

The team has referenced classic gaming touchstones like The Legend of Zelda as inspiration, which is hard not to see. With a focus on melee combat, exploration, and the ability to discover new tools, it would be foolish to try to reinvent that wheel completely. At the same time, it's bringing plenty of new and unique elements to the table. In particular, we're talking about the Rot.

These little critters were a focal point of that initial reveal, and they're an integral part of combat and the experience as a whole. These tiny fuzzballs are shy at first, but they're also loyal to Kena on her quest to heal the land and bring peace to restless spirits. In combat, they pack a wallop, infusing Kena's attacks with special abilities and additional power. Of course, they have to build up their courage first; they're not remorseless killing machines by any stretch of the imagination.

And that's one of the things that I'm particularly excited about. The game has a message that elevates decency and kindness. Even though Kena faces resistance from spirits, they're not coming from a place of pure evil or malice. They're wounded, and she's ultimately there to help. That's a rare message to see in games, particularly ones that still feature exciting combat and action. I can't wait to see how it all comes together. ***– Jeff Cork***



Crimson Desert

Stake your claim

Platform PC **Style** 1-Player Role-Playing (Online TBA)
Publisher Pearl Abyss **Developer** Pearl Abyss **Release** Winter

Crimson Desert is a promising looking RPG by Pearl Abyss, maker of the popular Black Desert Online. At a glance, the game appears to be more of the same, but this standalone new IP scales back the MMO aspects of its predecessor to create a tighter, more story-driven role-playing epic.

One of Crimson Desert's main differences is that players control a single, fleshed-out character in Macduff. He's a mercenary living in Pywel, a geographically diverse continent featuring rolling plains, snow-capped mountains, and, of course, a barren desert. Story details remain scarce, but we know that Macduff must travel to various regions to unite the diverse population of humans and other fantastical races to his cause. Macduff's fellow mercs aren't nameless faces; they're fully realized characters with their own, often tragic, backstories and motivations. Watching these brothers and sisters-in-arms grow alongside Macduff gives Crimson Desert a healthy narrative weight.

Pearl Abyss wants players to get the most of their exploring every inch of Pywel. NPC interactions and side quests are designed with purpose in mind instead of just padding. Freeform exploration is complemented by traditional dungeons featuring elaborate puzzles. Macduff can climb surfaces and swing on ropes, so it's fair to expect a solid amount of platforming, too. The brutal combat appears weightier than Black Desert's but retains a stylish flair and incorporates elements of martial arts and even pro wrestling. The most exciting aspect of the reveal trailer was seeing Macduff hopping atop a dragon and soaring through the skies.

Crimson Desert's gorgeous world, visceral combat, and more focused narrative has raised many an eyebrow. Hopefully, the game lives up to its lofty potential when it arrives this winter.
– Marcus Stewart

Biomutant

Freaky creatures

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Style** 1-Player Action
Publisher THQ Nordic **Developer** Experiment 101 **Release** May 25

I've been looking forward to Experiment 101's debut project since Biomutant was announced back in August 2017. Since then, the self-described "post-apocalyptic kung-fu fable" has been demoed every year or so, but a firm release date has yet to materialize. While we admire the studio's commitment to not releasing the game until it's ready, its most recent stretch of radio silence led publisher THQ Nordic to issue a statement in early 2020 reiterating that it hadn't been canceled. And that's a relief, considering that there doesn't seem to be anything quite like it out there.

Every time I've checked out a demo, I've been impressed with the creative character and enemy design. Players can tweak their anthropomorphic critter with a variety of different fur patterns, colors, and styles – and that's just on the cosmetic side. As your character progresses, they can unlock new genetic enhancements that not only switch up their appearance but also add effects and abilities, like insectoid claws or tails that can whip around and damage enemies. That's in addition to being able to customize your firearms, melee-combat forms, and even a drivable mecha.

This is purely speculation at this point, but we wouldn't be surprised that one of the reasons the game has been delayed is to take advantage of the new-gen consoles. Considering Biomutant's gorgeous art style and the team's apparent perfectionism, it seems as likely as not that Experiment 101 would want it to look as good as it possibly could. ***– Jeff Cork***

Horizon Forbidden West

Aloy takes to the Pacific

Platform PS5, PS4 **Style** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** Guerrilla Games **Release** 2021

Horizon Zero Dawn is one of those rare stories where an established developer took a chance, tried something drastically different, and knocked it out of the park. Watching the minds behind the shooter series Killzone come together for a new idea that excited them – a massive action/RPG set in a post-apocalyptic world – was equally refreshing and endearing. The team must have felt the magic, because Horizon Zero Dawn ended on a cliffhanger that heavily hinted that protagonist Aloy would be back with more mysteries to solve. Sony officially announced the sequel, Horizon Forbidden West, a few months back with an intriguing trailer showing our fierce hero battling new machines, meeting new tribes, and most importantly, getting a change of scenery for her new adventures.

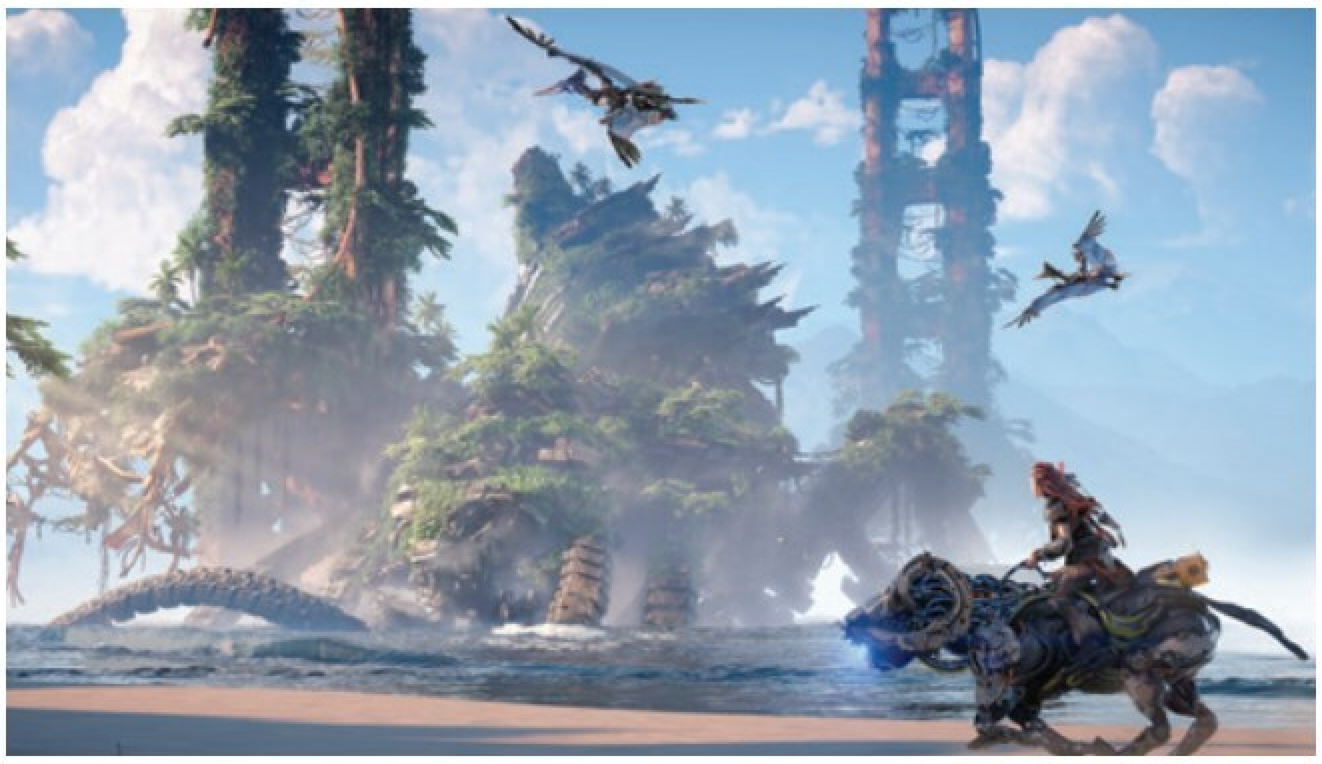
Aloy's adventure in Horizon Zero Dawn took place in what was Utah and Colorado, but it's clear from the announcement trailer and screenshots that Aloy is expanding her knowledge of the world by traveling westward. In a video for PlayStation, game director Mathijs De Jonge said the game's title refers to this "new mysterious frontier that stretches from Utah in the USA all the way to the Pacific Ocean in the west." As Aloy makes her way west, she discovers valleys, deserts, and cities, but she also spends time underwater finding sunken ruins and wrestling with aquatic machines, like Shellsnappers. It's also been no secret that she makes her way to San Francisco; the trailer not only showed off an area with its name, but also gave us a glimpse at the Golden Gate Bridge.

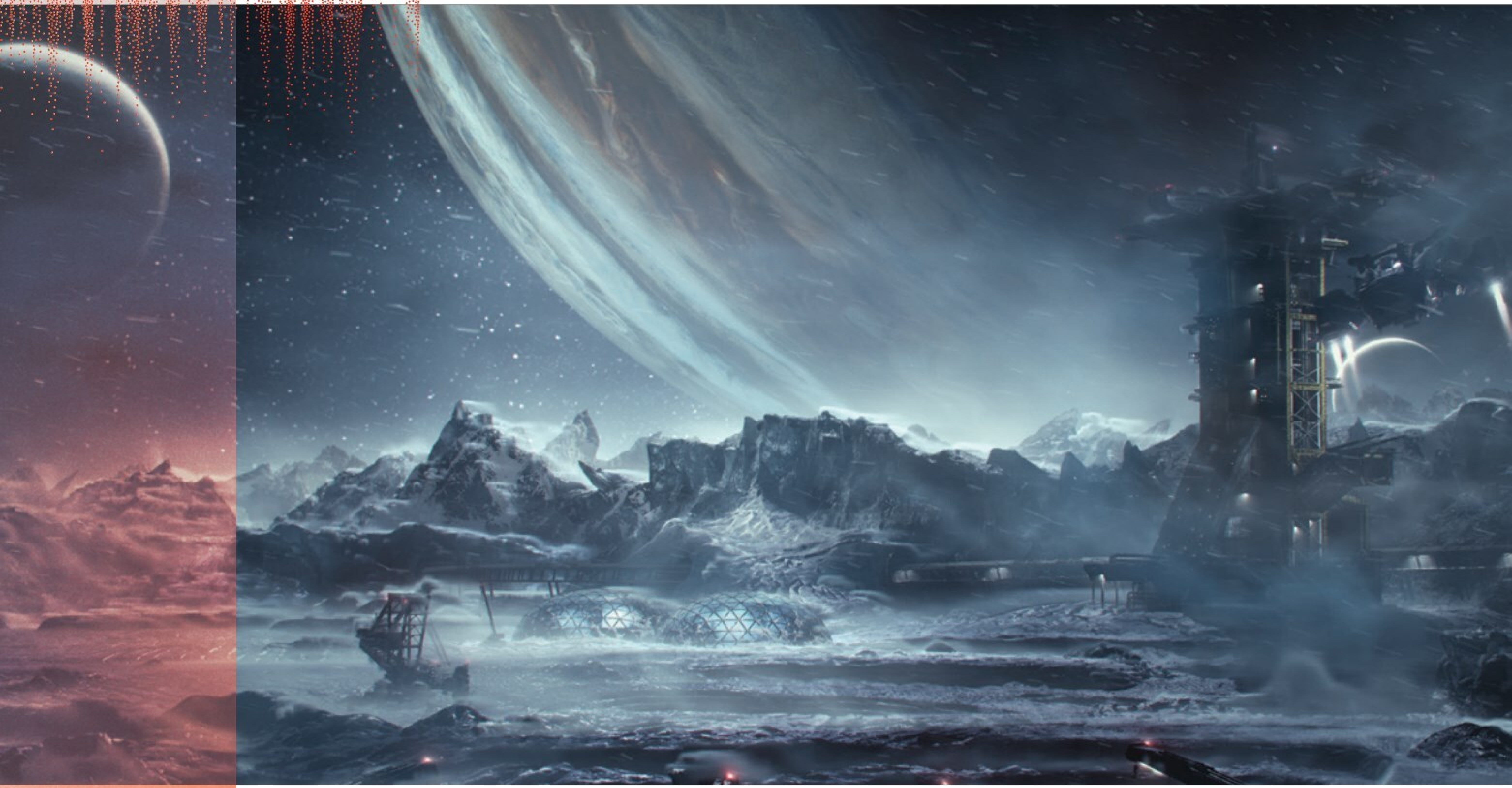
Guerrilla Games teased dozens of new machines for this journey, which has me excited about the possibilities. Just seeing the new mechanical elephant was a sight to behold. We explore underwater, so hopefully a roboshark is in the cards. Even more exciting is all the new tribes Aloy will encounter; some are peaceful, but others are hostile, like one that has learned the knowledge to override machines and use them in battle. The trailer also confirmed the return of wandering researcher Sylens. Aloy's relationship with Sylens has been complicated, to say the least, so I'm curious what he's been up to and if he's behind any of the new dangers.

Forbidden West isn't just about discovering a new place; it's also about protecting it. Based on the trailer, danger is everywhere, whether it's in the increasingly intense weather or a mysterious red blight that's been killing off plants, animals, and tribes. It'll be up to Aloy to get to the bottom of things, or risk the world as she knows it going into extinction. Sadly, we still haven't seen much of the combat, but the trailer did confirm Aloy's Focus skill is back, which helps her scan the world. We also saw her ride a Charger, so she must have a new way to override them. Of course, she's still equipped with her trusty bow, giving us at least one way to target weak points on metal baddies.

Geurrilla Games has already shown it knows how to create an intriguing backdrop that's full of mysteries and engaging environments to explore, and I can't wait to go on another open-world adventure set in this stunning and wondrous universe.

– Kimberley Wallace





The Callisto Protocol

Into the Dead Space

Platform PC, Consoles TBA **Style** 1-Player Action **Publisher** Krafton **Developer** Striking Distance Studios **Release** 2022

The newly formed Striking Distance Studios had just moved into an office when the pandemic hit in early 2020. Based in San Ramon, Calif., the team occupied this development space for only two weeks before it had to split up to shelter at home. "The paint was still fresh," says founder and CEO Glen Schofield. "It's heart-wrenching at times."

Striking Distance's team, which has expanded to more than 150 people, has found a way to work together remotely during the pandemic and is so confident in its progress that it delivered a teaser trailer during The Game Awards for its debut title, The Callisto Protocol.

The opening shot is within a dimly lit cell of Black Iron Prison. A loud bang mixed with a demonic moan awakens an inmate, a middle-aged man wearing an orange jumpsuit. The next shot should give any fan of the Dead Space series pause. The inmate rises, and we see he has a glowing green meter on the back of his neck, looking a lot like the resource-integration gear protagonist Isaac Clarke used to keep his vitals in check in EA's now-dormant series.

Schofield was one of the masterminds behind Dead Space, and The Callisto Protocol shows he still has science-fiction horror stories to tell. The health meter is Striking Distance Studios' message to Dead Space players they should be paying attention to this new project, which just happens to be developed by many of the people who made those games. Schofield wouldn't reveal many details about the project or say if it is being designed as a spiritual successor, but he did reveal that it is being designed as a story-driven, single-player, survival-horror experience.

Regarding the name of the game, Callisto is Jupiter's second-largest moon. "In doing research on Callisto, scientists say we could possibly have a colony on it since it has water," Schofield says. "It has a giant, frozen ocean. They actually call it the dead moon of Jupiter." Schofield jokes that the name Dead Moon crossed his mind, but it would have been a little too close to Dead Space. Additionally, the team wanted The Callisto Protocol to convey more of a science-fiction name, whereas Dead Space sounds more like horror.

That's not to say that Striking Distance is shying away from horror. Schofield wants this project to be one of the scariest games ever made, and the trailer shows us some of the terror awaiting us. We learn the prison is on lockdown for reasons unknown, and see one of its hulking robotic wardens malfunctioning outside of the prisoner's cell. Its red eye blinks on and off and its voice modulator stutters to the point of its sounds holding no meaning. Something fast and loud is darting through the corridors, leading one to believe being locked in a cell may be the safest place to be. The inmate tells his bunkmate to get up because something isn't right, but it turns out the problem is within his cell. His bunkmate has turned into some kind of giant beast with an exposed brain and multiple mouths. It roars, drools, and then vomits on the inmate. We see the inmate held up by tentacles. A giant one is jammed into his throat and pumps something into his gut.

Schofield says we shouldn't get attached to this inmate, as he isn't the game's protagonist. That character has been determined but hasn't been shown yet. This prisoner is just "someone who met an unfortunate fate."

When asked if the trailer was just a CG tease world or would represent the look of the game, Schofield pauses and says, "I don't know how much I can say about it, but we're going for a realistic look for the game. Being on PC and consoles – especially next-gen consoles – we're going to make this thing look real. We want you to feel you are inside of the bowels of this prison. I would say the visuals are what we are going for."

We also couldn't get confirmation on what systems The Callisto Protocol is in development for, but Schofield said the team is looking at all of them right now and will see what happens in the next couple of years. As of now, all consoles are on the table for the game's 2022 release.

– Andrew Reiner

12 Minutes

The clock is ticking, the clock is ticking

Platform Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, PC
Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive
Developer Luis Antonio **Release** 2021

Since its premiere at PAX East in 2015, 12 Minutes has had a slow drip-feed of new information, so it's telling that we're still excited to get our hands on this inventive adventure game more than five years later. The premise is simple: You are a man stuck in a 12-minute time loop, trying desperately to prevent the death of your pregnant wife. In the middle of dinner, a police officer arrives and accuses your wife of murdering his father. During the ensuing struggle, your wife is killed, and no matter how many times you relive the event, it always seems to end in tragedy. The concept is strong, and so is its all-star cast; James McAvoy, Daisy Ridley, and Willem Dafoe are all lending their vocal talents to the game. ***– Ben Reeves***

Ghostwire: Tokyo

A new kind of creepy visitor

Platform PS5, PC **Style** 1-Player Action/Adventure
Publisher Bethesda Softworks **Developer** Tango Gameworks
Release 2021

As the creator of The Evil Within games, Tango Gameworks has already proven it knows how to tell chilling, psychological tales. It's also showing a fearlessness about trying new things with brand-new IP Ghostwire: Tokyo. Instead of making this a straight-up horror game, Tango Gameworks opted for more action-packed chaos and created an ominous and spooky version of Tokyo based on Japanese Yokai folklore, urban legends, and scary stories. You must discover why people are mysteriously disappearing, but beware: This is a dangerous place, with threats around every corner. Thankfully, you have paranormal abilities, such as launching fireballs or reaching inside baddies to rip out their cores, to protect yourself. The cool powers coupled with exploring this strange and haunting version of Tokyo has my attention. Now here's hoping solving the mystery is just as intriguing.
– Kimberley Wallace

Deathloop

Time waits for no one

Platform PS5, PC **Style** 1-Player Action (2-Player Online)
Publisher Bethesda Softworks **Developer** Arkane Studios
Release May 21

Arkane Studios has been on a winning streak lately, putting out the fantastic Dishonored series and 2017's Prey. The studio's next game, Deathloop, looks to continue the team's pedigree for unique game design wrapped around the immersive-sim genre. The twist this time, though, is Deathloop is a multiplayer game – something rare for the mostly single-player focused studio.

Players assume the role of Colt, an assassin caught in a time loop, tasked with killing eight different targets before the clock strikes midnight. Colt has an advantage over his targets, though. Taking place on the island Blackreef, every time the loop resets, the other inhabitants forget the events of the previous day. Colt does not. Once time resets in Deathloop, players will be able to use their previous knowledge of Blackreef, its inhabitants, and their schedules to inch closer to their overall mission.

Where it gets interesting is the character Julianna, an assassin who is hunting Colt and trying to protect Blackreef's time loop. Players who choose Julianna enter another player's game, attempting to stop Colt before completing his mission. You cannot turn this feature off, either. Playing the game offline will allow Julianna to be controlled by A.I.

Arkane games are always stylish and require a meticulous attention to detail to pull of their numerous missions. Deathloop looks to continue this trend, featuring all the powers and complicated tasks players have come to expect from Arkane, all in a 1960s-inspired aesthetic. Even though Microsoft bought Bethesda and its studios last year, Deathloop was announced before the deal and, as of right now, is still a PlayStation 5 and PC exclusive. We can't wait to dip back into the Arkane well when it launches on May 21.
– Blake Hester

Dying Light 2

Back from the dead

Platform PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC **Style** 1-Player Action (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Techland **Release** TBA

Dying Light 2 wowed us when we saw the first extended gameplay in 2019, but developer Techland has largely gone silent on the project. Originally planned for a spring 2020 release, the Polish studio kicked off last year by delaying the highly anticipated open-world, post-apocalyptic zombie title indefinitely, saying it needed more time to reach the vision it set out for.

The vision Techland is striving for with Dying Light 2 is impressive. Not only is the world four times as large as the that of its predecessor, but it promises to take the concept of player agency and choice to new levels. Alliances you form or people you betray can close off quest lines, open opportunities, and even change the very world itself.

In the sequence I saw in 2019, players could forge a relationship with one of the most powerful individuals in the city, The Colonel, or they could betray him and remove the opportunity to work with him. If they opted to betray The Colonel and drain his reservoir, it opened a new area to explore with a new zombie type that was buried in the lakebed. These kinds of choices are commonplace in Dying Light 2, giving the player a new level of power when shaping the direction the narrative takes.

Of course, this is all stacked on top of the various other hooks from the first Dying Light, including fierce zombies, horrible humans, and a day/night cycle that brings out the true terror with undead creatures that can exceed your parkour abilities. If you played the first game, you know the intense feeling of leaving the light, knowing what lurks in the shadows, waiting to hunt you down with scary proficiency.

Thankfully, new protagonist Aiden Caldwell has a much more impressive traversal moveset than his predecessor, Kyle Crane. On top of the sliding, climbing, jumping, and ziplining from the first game, Aiden can also wall run, parkour off zombies, and even use those same stragglers as cushions to break a long fall. The Dying Light 2 protagonist also has access to a grappling hook, which can be used to cross large gaps, as well as a paraglider to drift across long distances and land softly.

That grappling hook, which did appear in the first game, isn't just for traversal, though. If you find yourself in a sticky situation with enemies, you can use that tool to swing full force to stun or knock them over, giving you time to either deliver the killing blow or make your great escape.

With seemingly unprecedented levels of player choice, an enormous world, and an expanded list of tricks up the protagonist's sleeve, Dying Light 2 makes numerous grand promises. However, with a substantial amount of extra time and new console technology, hopefully Techland is in the right position to deliver on everything it envisioned when it first began work on this anticipated sequel. ***– Brian Shea***

Tales Of Arise

Evolving a beloved series

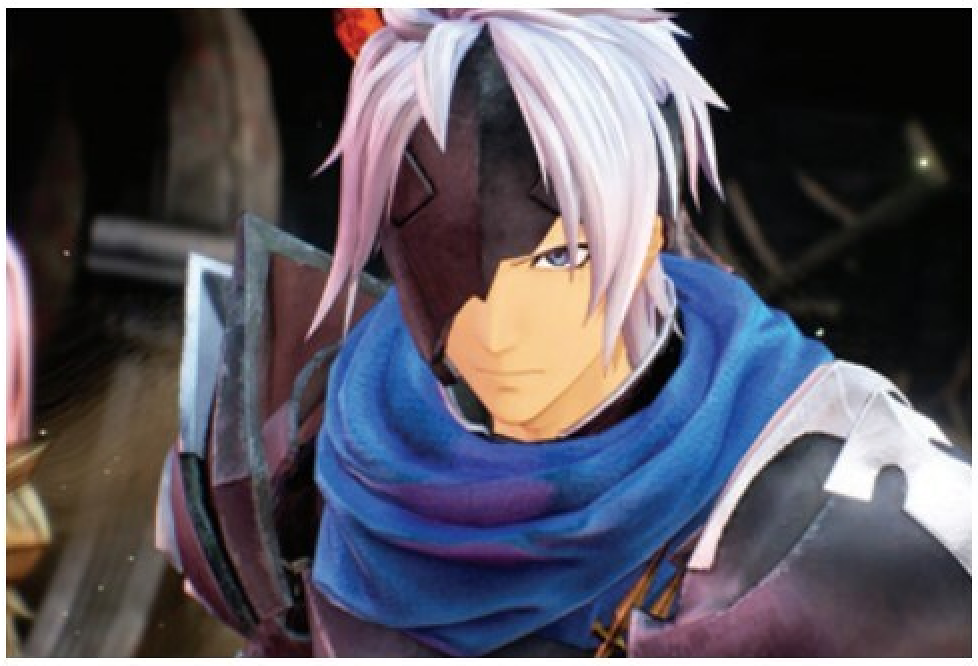
Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Style** 1 to 4-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Bandai Namco **Developer** Bandai Namco **Release** 2021

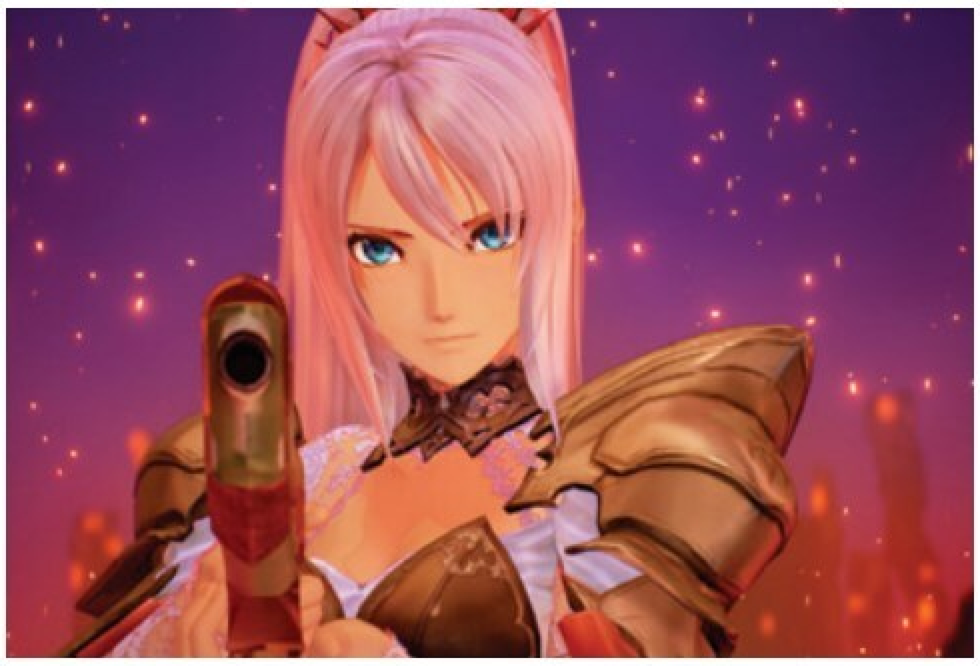
Bandai Namco's long-running Tales series has captivated audiences with its entertaining characters, hilarious skits, and satisfying action combat. The franchise recently celebrated its 25th anniversary, serving as a reminder of all the wonderful protagonists it has brought us through the years, from Symphonia's idealistic Llyod to Vesperia's cynical Yuri. However, it's now time for new blood to rise to the occasion and take the series to new places with Tales of Arise.

A common theme in the Tales' universe is coexistence, and Tales of Arise showcases that by focusing on two different characters from two very different worlds. You see the story through the eyes of Alphen, who is from the struggling land of Dahna. The other main character Shionne's homeland of Rena has ruled over Dahna for the past 300 years, depleting Dahna's natural resources and keeping its citizens subservient. When the pair encounter each other by sheer chance, they realize they need to work together to change their fates.

Both Shionne and Alphen's abilities require them to rely on one another. Shionne has the power to cast healing artes, while Alphen wields the "Torch Flame Sword." When Alphen uses this special sword, the fire damages him, which means Shionne's healing power will be an asset when he needs to unleash its power.

Tales of Arise is a chance for the series to reinvent itself, as it was getting stuck in a rut with its more recent entries. Bandai Namco has been candid about this game being a great opportunity for evolution. We've already seen this in the new art style, which mixes its hallmark anime visuals with photorealistic artwork. There's a reason why the series is so beloved, so we can't wait to see what's in store.
– Kimberley Wallace





Final Fantasy XVI

A tale of crystals and big beasts

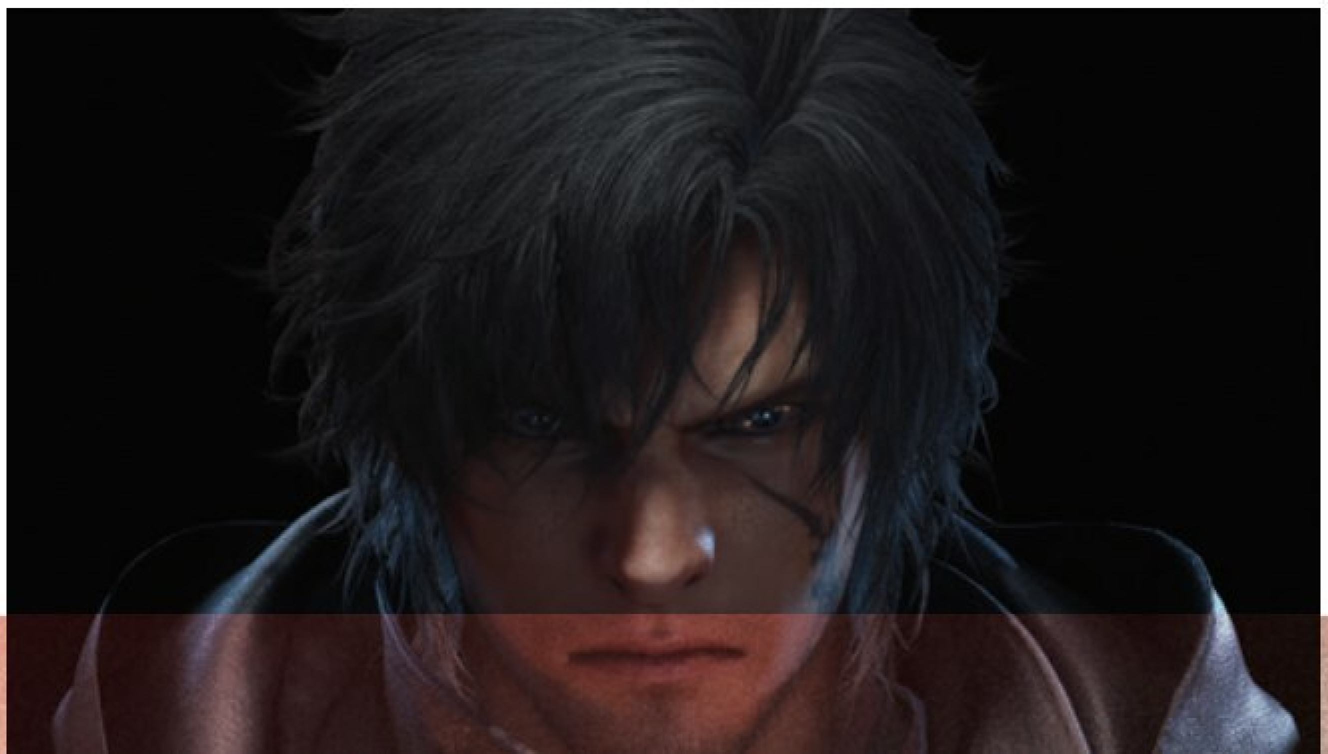
Platform PS5 **Style** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Square Enix **Release** TBA

Final Fantasy is an important part of RPG history, and fans always look forward to its evolutions delivering new, mystifying worlds. However, the last few years have been more about getting the franchise back on track after some disappointing entries and extremely long development cycles. After MMORPG Final Fantasy XIV righted the ship (the second time), Final Fantasy XV followed with some big ideas, and Final Fantasy VII Remake proved the series could still appeal to old-school fans and newcomers alike. Now eyes are back on the franchise with a newfound curiosity of how it follows up the past few years of change.

Set in the land of Valisthea, Final Fantasy XVI returns to a more medieval setting like XII's. Crystals have always been important in the series, but this time they are at the root of the political tale about warring nations. Referred to as "Mothercrystals," they bless nations and allow them to thrive. However, peace is a fragile thing and tensions rise when a mysterious blight spreads, causing conflict to boil over.

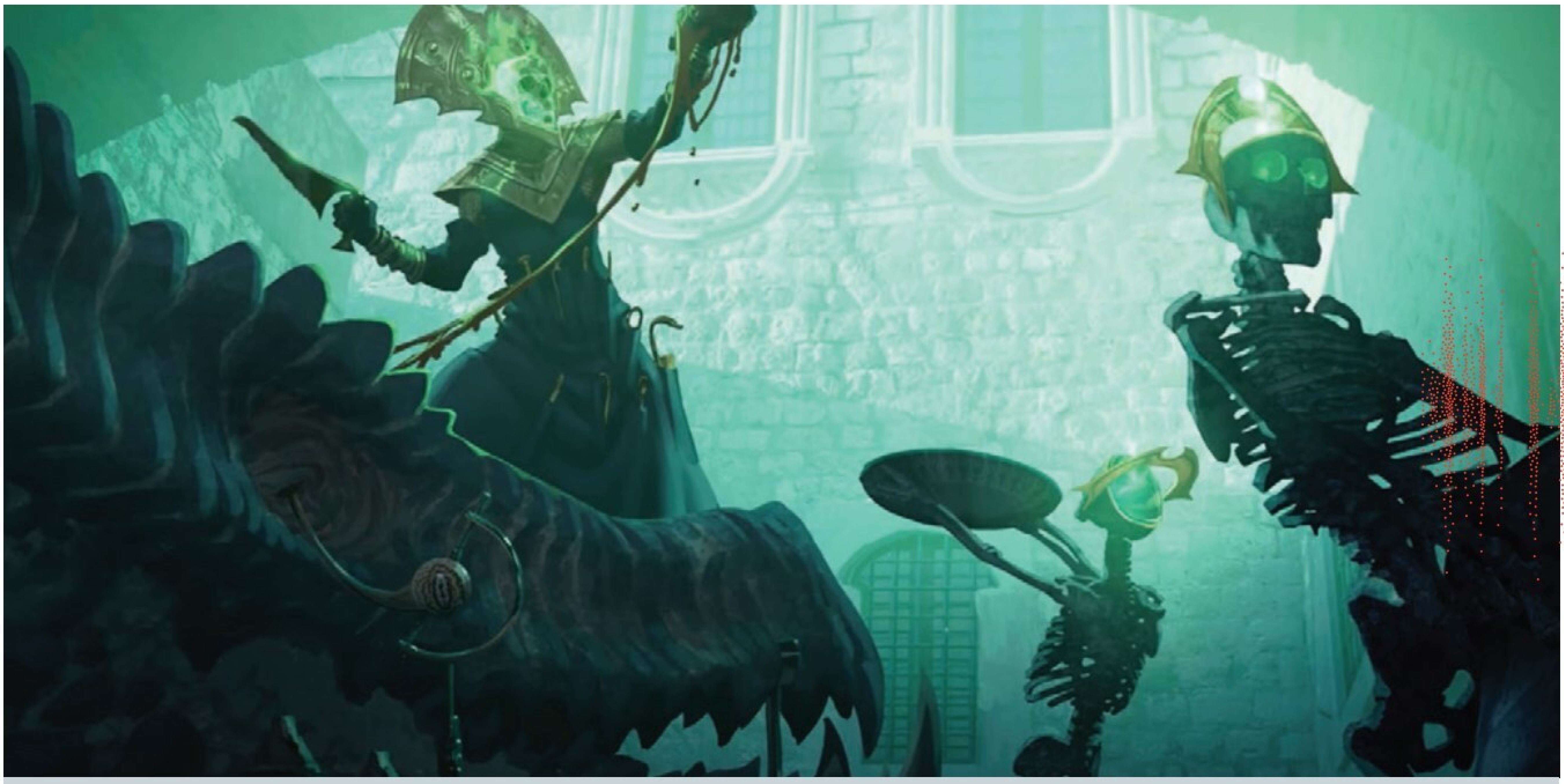
Clive Rosfield stands as the main protagonist; he will stop at nothing to protect his younger brother, Joshua, who can transform into the Phoenix Eikon (Eikon is the new word for summons). Along with their longtime friend Jill Warrick, who was raised with them, the three must confront tragedy and solve the greater mysteries at play.

Final Fantasy XVI looks to involve Eikons greatly in its main plotline, as Titan, Shiva, and Ifrit were all over the reveal trailer. This already has my interest, and I'm even more excited that Naoki Yoshida is acting as producer and Hiroshi Takai is directing. Both have proven to have great sensibilities with turning Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn into the massive success and fantastic experience it is today, and I can't wait to see what else they can bring to the Final Fantasy universe. ***– Kimberley Wallace***



Dragon Age 4

The future of Thedas



Platform TBA **Style** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** BioWare **Release** TBA

Dragon Age 4 is poised to take fans of Thedas where they have never been within the video game franchise: Tevinter. While the associated novels and comics have taken us deep within the underbelly of power-driven mages and a society built on the backs of slaves, the games themselves have only skirted this expansive location through characters with personal ties to it. We were introduced to Fenris, an escaped slave who teased the horrors his kind faced at the hands of blood magic-wielding magisters, in Dragon Age 2. In Inquisition, we were enthralled by Dorian Pavus, an Altus on his way to become a magister. This compassionate character was bent on making his countrymen see where they had gone wrong while learning key lessons about his own problematic upbringing. He was also the victim of an attempted blood ritual, by his own father nonetheless, due to Tevinter's scorned eye on homosexual relationships. In the same game, we also met Cremisius "Krem" Aclassi, a transgender soldier chased out for being anything other than what Tevinter wants a citizen to be.

The games leading up to this point have painted horrific pictures of what Tevinter is like, as well as Antiva, where we waded through the bloody narratives of life there through the assassin Zevran. So much of this corner of Thedas is both explored and ignored entirely, a paradox made even more evident in the most recent comic series with Blue Wraith that stars a returning Fenris taking back his homeland of Tevinter by killing slave owners and magisters alike.

But more than learning about these different parts of Thedas, the true implications revealed in Inquisition regarding the origins of magic, the Blights, and the downfall of the ancient elves has turned the lore we thought we knew on its head. The third game threw curveball after curveball about the Forgotten Ones, the Dread Wolf, and the death of an elite society. We even learned about the creation of the Veil itself, an otherworldly place that is heavily set in the games when regarding the Fade and the territory of mages.

What makes Dragon Age 4 so exciting is that it has the potential to tie up many of the loose ends that are stretched between the games and their printed companions, setting the stage for a mind-blowing conclusion to a build-up that first began with the humble beginnings of Dragon Age: Origins.

BioWare also previously revealed concept art that alluded to the possibility of having a Mortalitasi companion, or at very least a Mortalitasi key character, bringing the Nevarran Death Magic front and center. This would be an opportunity beyond the anime-style movie that bore Cassandra Penteghast's beginnings before we met her in Dragon Age II, and later as a companion in Dragon Age: Inquisition.

All of the fan theories, unanswered questions, and new areas of exploration have a chance to shine with Dragon Age 4, especially given the teaser trailer shown at The Game Awards, where we saw the innards of Tevinter with sky-crested buildings teeming with magic. If done right, this could be a love letter to fans that have traversed Thedas through the years, as well as an incredible motivator for those interested in exploring the other mediums that celebrate BioWare's iconic franchise.
– Liana Ruppert

Far Cry 6

You say you want a revolution

Platform PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Stadia, PC **Style** 1-Player Action (2-Player Online)
Publisher Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Toronto **Release** 2021

It's been three years since the last numbered entry in Ubisoft's Far Cry franchise took us to Hope County, Montana. The mainline series, once a dependable source of "Did you just see that?!" moments, had frankly become a little too familiar, with its regular cadence of sequels eroding that all-important sense of novelty. Far Cry 6 has me hopeful for the series in a way I haven't felt in years, thanks to great casting and an intriguing setting.

Players have long been forces of liberation, but the latest entry looks to be bumping it up to an impressive scale. As freedom fighter Dani Rojas, it's up to you to overthrow an entire regime and bring revolution to the fictional Caribbean island of Yara. It's been under the oppressive control of Anton Castillo, played by *Breaking Bad*'s Giancarlo Esposito. In an odd bit of coincidental casting, he also appears in that show's spinoff, *Better Call Saul*, with Michael Mando, perhaps best known to players as Far Cry 3's villainous Vaas.

We're not sure if Castillo will be as menacing a figure as some of Far Cry's other big baddies, like Vaas or Pagan Min, but the fact that he's a father adds an interesting wrinkle to the story. He's grooming his son, Diego, to take over his role as absolute ruler of the nation someday, and we're looking forward to learning how that element of the story plays out. Will the 13-year-old follow in his father's footsteps? Will the simmering conflict in his country inspire him to lead differently – or galvanize him into being even more brutal someday?

The last bit that has me excited is one of the biggest: the island itself. It's home to a large capital city, which is another change for the series. Players will be able to explore the space in huge battles, which also include an as-yet-unseen level of verticality. Sign me up! ***– Jeff Cork***

Solar Ash

Surreal and smooth

Platform PS5, PS4, PC **Style** 1-Player Action **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive **Developer** Heart Machine **Release** 2021

Heart Machine gained a following back in 2016 with the evocative art, challenging gameplay, and fascinating universe of Hyper Light Drifter. It was one of my favorite games that year, and I've been eager to see what the developer has up its sleeve for its sophomore effort. Announced in 2019, Solar Ash borrows some of the color palette and surreal presentation of the team's previous work. But as the game steers toward an announced release in 2021, it's clear that many other elements are taking this game in a brand-new direction.

Hyper Light Drifter was a tight 2D action game from a top-down perspective, recalling for many the early days of the Zelda franchise, albeit with a deeper focus on agility and speed. Solar Ash goes a different way, with a more refined 3D third-person camera, following a strange ethereal protagonist as they run through a world of bright colors.

I love smooth, flowing movement, and the brief glimpses that Heart Machine has shown of the game reveal that sinuous traversal paths are a big focus of play, almost as if the main character is roller-blading through the world. Those early looks also make it clear that gargantuan enemies and other creatures are a part of the equation, though we've yet to get a glimpse of how combat factors in.

Across its first two projects, there's a hypnagogic quality to Heart Machine's visuals that I'm very attracted to – a dreamlike sense of exaggerated colors and otherworldly environments that is unlike anything else. With Solar Ash making its way to PS5, in addition to PS4 and PC releases, I can't wait to see this new vision come to life in new-gen splendor.
– Matt Miller

Psychonauts 2

A meeting of the minds

Platform Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC, Mac
Style 1-Player Action/Platforming **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios
Developer Double Fine Productions **Release** 2021

Double Fine's 2017 VR experiment Psychonauts in the Rhombus of Ruin was a bridge between the original Psychonauts and its upcoming sequel. If you didn't get a chance to play that oddball adventure game, you didn't miss much, but it provides a small amount of background leading into Psychonauts 2. In short, newly minted PSI Cadet Razputin "Raz" Aquato joined the team set to rescue the head of the Psychonauts and, in the process, helped capture the villain and ex-dentist, Dr. Loboto.

Psychonauts 2 picks up this narrative as Raz brings Dr. Loboto back to the Psychonauts' home base for interrogation. However, Raz quickly discovers that his beloved Psychonauts aren't exactly what they seem. The Psychonauts' second-in-command has been pushing the psychic-research organization toward unorthodox studies, such as necromancy. Now Raz has to put a stop to this dastardly behavior and save his friends.

As with the original game, Psychonauts 2 features a wild assortment of platforming sequences as Raz jumps into the minds of different people. During our various demos, we've seen Raz leap across platforms of floating teeth, run through upside-down rooms, and battle mental constructs atop a giant psychedelic flower. As Raz explores these mindscapes, he dismantles other people's inner demons using his diverse psi powers, such as telekinesis, pyrokinesis, and levitation.

The Psychonauts series has always been a bit niche despite the fact that it is full of witty dialogue and crowd-pleasing antics. Psychonauts 2 looks like it's shaping up to be a great time, so hopefully Microsoft can help this absurd platformer reach a wider audience when it releases sometime this year.
– Ben Reeves

Season

A journey through a dying world

Platform PS5, PC **Style** 1-Player Adventure
Publisher Scavengers Studio **Developer** Scavengers Studio
Release TBA

Season is the next game from developer Scavengers Studio. While the team has been teasing it for a while, we got our first real look in December at The Game Awards.

Billed as a bicycle road-trip adventure game, Season asks players to document a new world before a "cataclysm" wipes it all away. In the trailer, the main character records the sounds of a dragonfly and draws intricate sketches of her surroundings. Narration offers a few more tiny hints about the world: "Our grandparents lived for a thousand years, and our parents had a century to themselves," the voice says. "But us? We have one season." The trailer concludes with looks at the cities and ruins of the world, all in a gorgeous painterly art style.

While we still don't know a ton about Season, we can't wait to see more of this new adventure coming to the PlayStation 5 and PC. ***– Blake Hester***

Open Roads

A mother-daughter road trip for the ages

Platform PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC
Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive
Developer Fullbright **Release** 2021

As the masterminds behind Gone Home and Tacoma, Fullbright has a way of creating mysteries that make you curious about their worlds and inhabitants. The studio is now teaming up with Annapurna Interactive to bring some star power to a sentimental tale about a young woman's road trip with her mother to discover her grandmother's hidden past. Keri Russell (*The Americans*, *The Rise of Skywalker*) voices the mother, while Kaitlyn Dever (*Booksmart*, *Monsterland*) takes the role of the daughter. Between the intriguing mystery of the grandmother's secret life and Fullbright's forte with crafting poignant moments, I can't wait to get on the road.
– Kimberley Wallace

Overwatch 2

Will this be the year?

Platform PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC **Style** 12-Player Online Shooter **Publisher** Blizzard Entertainment
Developer Blizzard Entertainment **Release** TBA

Overwatch 2 debuted with a bang, giving BlizzCon 2019 attendees the chance to get their hands on the sequel's new Story Experience and multiplayer mode. In the year that followed, we expected to be showered in Overwatch 2 news, but Blizzard was surprisingly quiet and didn't reveal any new information for the anticipated follow up. That's not to say the game is in trouble or that Blizzard is changing course. As game director Jeff Kaplan stated in a developer update video, the team will reveal more details in February during BlizzCon Online.

The lack of information didn't leave Overwatch fans entirely emptyhanded. Blizzard continued to deliver new content for Overwatch 1 at nearly the same frequency it has for the last four years. However, outside of the addition of Echo, we didn't get any new heroes. There's a chance that Blizzard did tease one for Overwatch 2 in the release of the new free-for-all map, Kanezaka.

As Kaplan says "There's a lot of contextual storytelling we are doing with this map, with some Easter eggs and payoff that's going to come in Overwatch 2. We're going to learn more not only about our two favorite Shimada brothers [Genji and Hanzo], but possibly some other people as well that relate to that group. You should really pay attention to the graffiti and every location in [Kanezaka]."

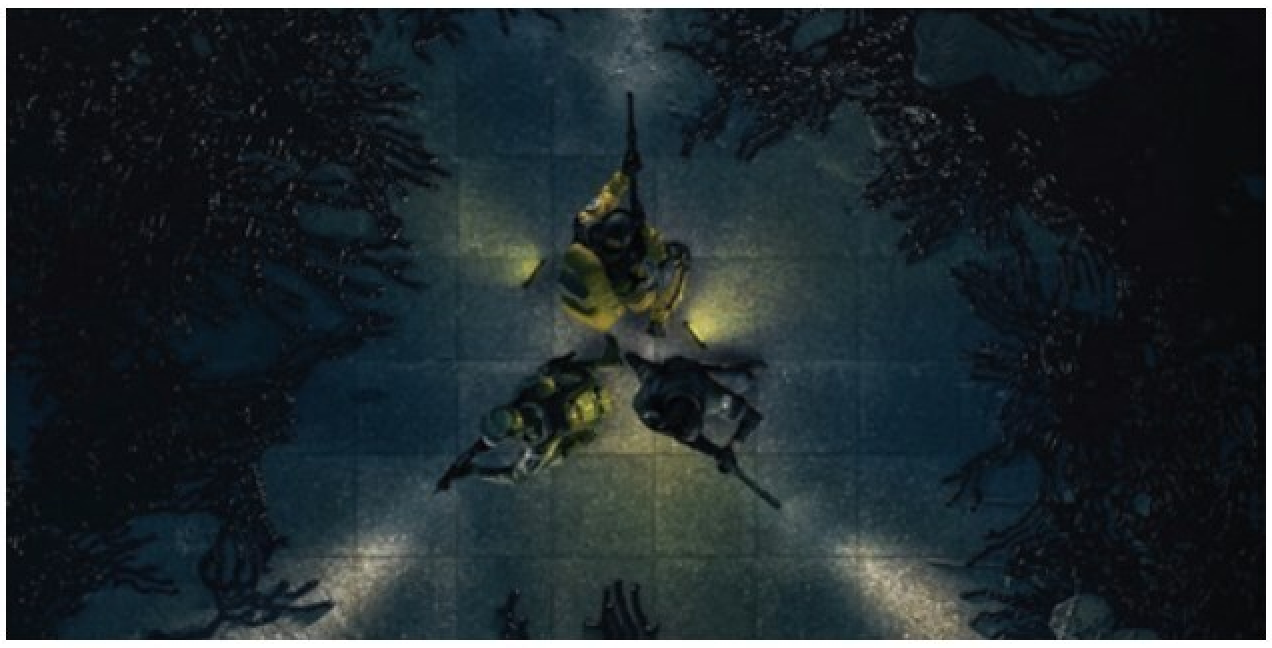
The graffiti and location that fans have focused the most on both have to do with cats or foxes. A cat café is filled with potential teases (and artwork of the Overwatch team's actual cats), and some colorful graffiti also appears to have a fox on it.

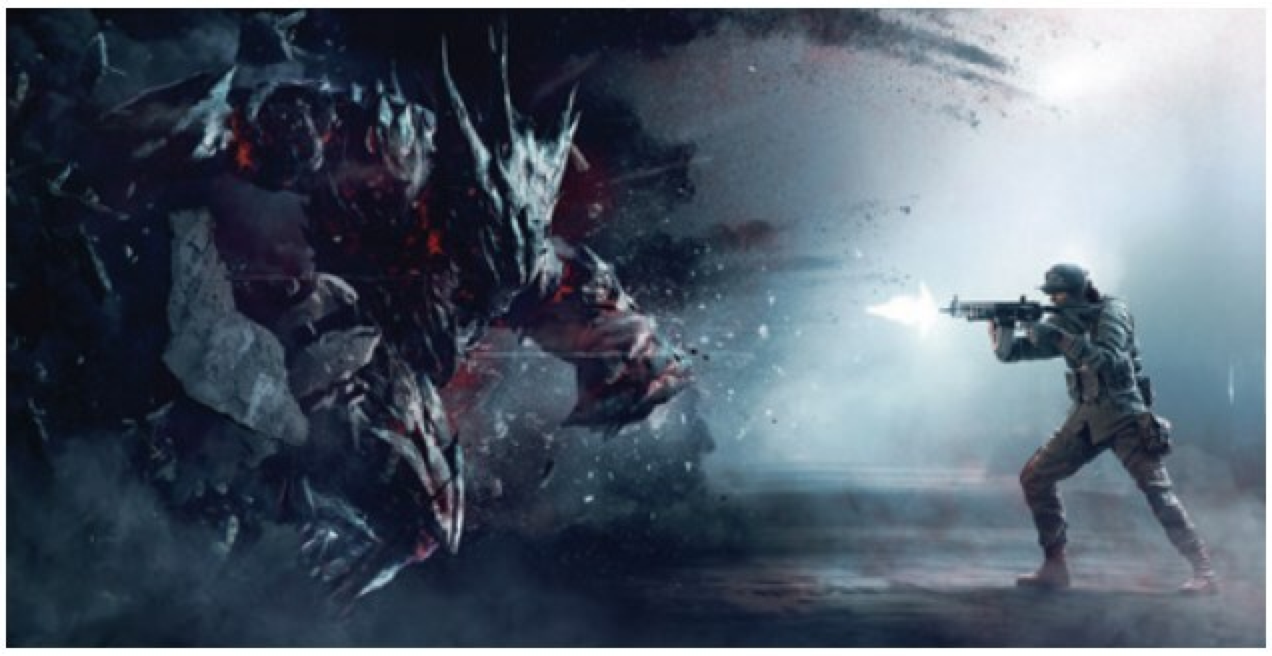
When I visited Blizzard to get my hands on Overwatch 2 for last year's cover story, Kaplan showed me silhouettes of four upcoming heroes: one of them was joined by what appeared to be a fennec-fox-like creature. There's a good chance that the fox showcased in the graffiti could be the one I saw, although I should point out that I believe the ears in the silhouette were longer. Regardless, the map and Kaplan's words clearly point in the direction of this hero, who I saw holding a large shuriken weapon.

This tease also basically confirms the Shimada brothers will be a part of Overwatch 2's new Story Experience. Genji appeared in the CG story trailer, but the narrative direction didn't focus on him, and instead took players to Rio de Janeiro to focus on Lucio and a war unfolding in his hometown against Null Sector.

When Overwatch 2 was announced in 2019, Blizzard said it was coming to PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC, but that was before Sony and Microsoft officially revealed PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S, respectively. One of the announcements I expect to hear at BlizzCon is the release plan for these new platforms.

On my wishlist, I'm hoping Blizzard shows us more signs of new content outside of the existing cast of heroes. Overwatch 2's reveal leaned heavily on the faces we know and love, but didn't convey a true sense of something new. ***– Andrew Reiner***





Rainbow Six Quarantine

Us against the otherworld

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC
Style 3-Player Online Shooter **Publisher** Ubisoft
Developer Ubisoft Montréal **Release** 2021

Rainbow Six Siege continues to be a major player in the online multiplayer world with numerous expansions, constant tweaks, and a seemingly never-ending rotation of content. As the R6 community continues to grow, the Quarantine spinoff – despite its unfortunate naming due to the events of 2020 – is a welcome pivot for a new experience set within this world.

Rainbow Six Quarantine delves this Tom Clancy universe into new depths of cooperative play by pitting a team of three against an alien enemy. As an otherworldly parasite crushes everything it comes in contact with, it's up to players to suit up, move out, and survive as long as possible.

For those who appreciated the Outbreak limited-time event that R6 Operation Chimera offered, this is an extension of that. Quarantine provides a threat that requires tactics, a level of comfort with Ubisoft's combat style, and a fresh spin on a beloved game. Plus, who doesn't want to take down aliens? ***– Liana Ruppert***

Balan Wonderworld

Dressed for success

Platform PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC
Style 1 or 2-Player Platforming **Publisher** Square Enix
Developer Balan Company **Release** March 26

Fans of good-old-fashioned 3D platforming should keep Balan Wonderworld square in their sights. The whimsical title is directed by Yuji Naka of Sonic and Nights into Dreams fame and borrows DNA from both series to help craft a wholly new adventure. Balan Wonderworld puts players in the shoes of Leo and Emma, two kids who encounter Balan, a flamboyant maestro, who whisks them away to the magical Wonderworld. This dream-like land would make *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* author Lewis Carroll proud with its wondrous, exaggerated imagery accented by theater motifs. Unfortunately, Wonderworld has been overrun by the Negati, monsters that have manifested from negative feelings such as sadness and weakness. It's up to our young friends to save the day.

Wardrobe is a key element to any stage show, and Balan Wonderworld's gameplay revolves around wearing special costumes (with more than 80 available) that bestow unique abilities. A wolf costume can conjure tornados, while similarly wacky outfits allow players to freeze time, fire rocket punches, and even walk on air. Even better is that the local two-player co-op lets players combine costume abilities to overcome unique obstacles. Regardless of the threads Leo and Emma rock, you'll need all the help you can get to tackle the imaginative roster of bosses, including a three-headed dragon fused with a fire hydrant (get it?) and Cheshire-grinned cats packing monster-sized paws.

The 12 "Worlds Inside Heart," are pleasant realms corrupted by negative emotions, and provide a visual treat. The large platforming areas encourage players to discover collectibles as well as Tims, adorable critters that can battle alongside players and find items. Balan Wonderworld puts a smile on our faces every time we see it and we can't wait to discover what else Wonderworld holds in store. ***– Marcus Stewart***

Gotham Knights

All in the bat family

Platform PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC **Style** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Warner Bros. Games **Developer** WB Games Montréal **Release** 2021

Rocksteady Studios' trilogy of Batman Arkham games aren't just great comic-book games, they're great games, period. However, now that Rocksteady is moving on to Suicide Squad, it's time for a new group of heroes to rise up and assume the mantle of the bat. WB Games Montréal cut its teeth on Batman: Arkham Origins, which did a respectable job emulating Rocksteady's formula. However, WB Games Montréal hopes to make a bigger name for itself by making some bold choices with its next project. Its boldest move to date? Killing Batman.

Gotham Knights envisions a version of Gotham City choking on its own corruption. Not only has the city's greatest protector perished, but the city's police force has grown corrupt, leading to a rise in organized crime. Fortunately, several of Batman's former protégés are ready to step up and become the heroes this city needs. Dick Grayson (Nightwing), Barbara Gordon (Batgirl), Tim Drake (Robin), and Jason Todd (Red Hood) join forces and begin systematically dismantling Gotham's villains. However, this new team's greatest threat might be the secret criminal society pulling the strings from the shadows – the Court of Owls.

While Gotham Knights is disconnected from the Arkham series narratively, several aspects of its gameplay will feel familiar to fans. Gotham Knights is an open-world game full of environmental puzzles, action, and stealth. However, where the Arkham games usually took place within a confined area of the city, Gotham Knights gives players access to the entirety of Gotham – you'll even see Gotham City citizens going about their daily business as you glide across the rooftops.

Gotham Knights' four playable protagonists have skills and gadgets that are similar to those of Batman, and they can collect new gear and level up over the course of their journey. However, each hero also has talents that set them apart from each other. For example, the Red Hood is an aggressive character with a suite of ranged weapons. Robin, on the other hand, is a great pick for stealth players, and his tech skills allow him to hack into the Justice League's satellite. Using this tech, Robin can complete a series of short-range teleportations that make him hard to track. Not to be outdone, Batgirl is a formidable close-range combatant, and she can summon a cauldron of bats that swam her like a shield, attacking nearby enemies.

Players can choose to play as any one of the Knights and finish the campaign solo, or they can clean up Gotham City with a buddy in two-player mode. WB Games Montréal says that its missions are flexible enough to allow players to tackle each challenge however they like, so while Red Hood charges into the battlefield guns blazing, Nightwing can hang back and pick off stragglers from the shadows. Players will even be able to complete tag-team takedowns, which are ultra-powerful attacks that have two Knights laying the beatdown on a single opponent.

Rocksteady's Arkham games established a solid framework for a Batman game, and WB Games Montréal is taking many of those ideas and running with them in Gotham Knights. Fortunately, the studio is also injecting several new ideas into the mix. Batman might not be center stage for this adventure, but that doesn't have us any less excited for another tour of Gotham. ***– Ben Reeves***

The Lord Of The Rings: Gollum

A familiar tale through new eyes

Platform PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC
Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Daedalic Entertainment
Developer Daedalic Entertainment **Release** 2021

The Lord of the Rings universe is expansive, beloved, and (hopefully) never-ending. We've seen the world through the eyes of Bilbo Baggins, Frodo, and Shadow of Mordor's Talion, but now it's time to try a different perspective as the skillfully cunning Gollum.

Gollum is one of the most interesting characters in J.R.R. Tolkien's world because he's such a juxtaposition; he looks harmless and weak, but beneath that veneer of madness is a sharp mind and a soul that is torn between his kinder Smeagol personality and that of the vicious Gollum.

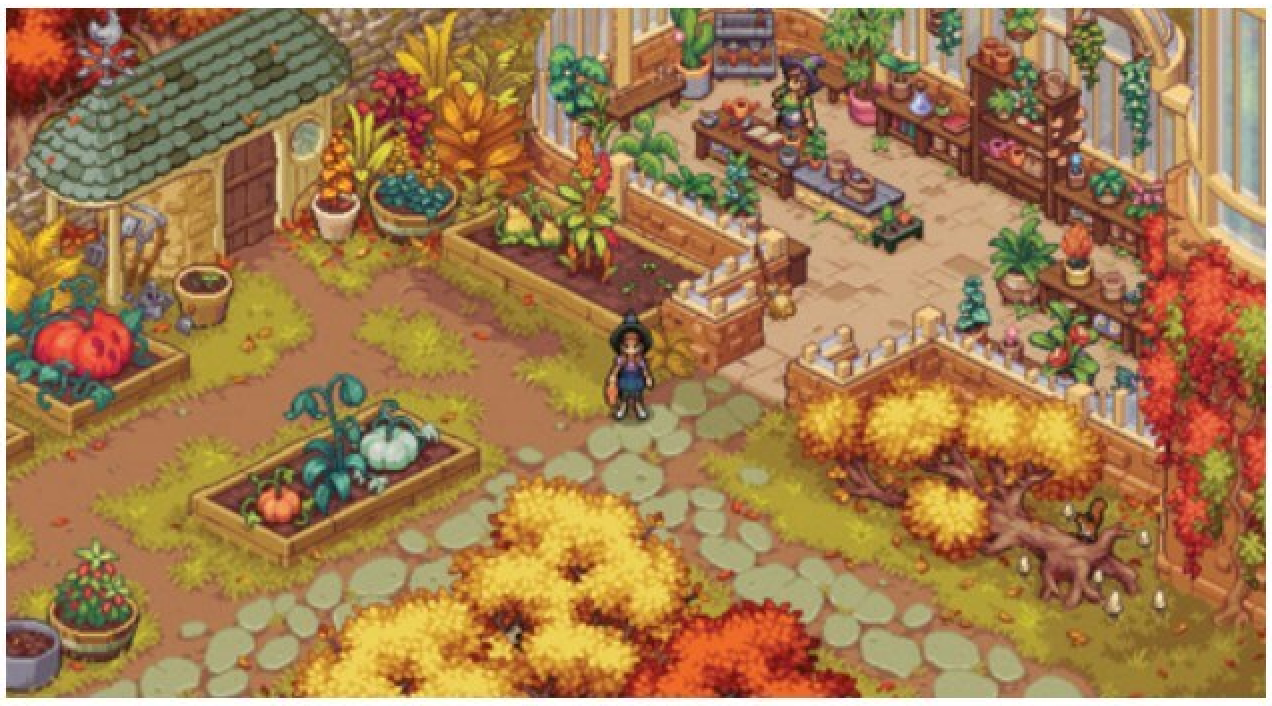
Tolkien was a genius when it came to story crafting, and that genius has been felt through books, movies, and more. To see that very world from the eyes of a character riddled with complexities may offer a fresh take on a familiar place, an experience that has the potential to breathe new life into a universe we love so much. ***– Liana Ruppert***

Witchbrook

The other magic school

Platform TBA **Style** 1-Player Simulation **Publisher** Chucklefish
Developer Chucklefish **Release** TBA

Want to get a quality magical education, but without being surrounded by Dumble-dorks? Developer Chucklefish has you covered with Witchbrook, an isometric school simulation that focuses on the lifestyle elements of being a witch in training. Your pixelated student attends classes, participates in extracurricular activities, and builds relationships with classmates and townspeople. Witchbrook looks like a charming and cute sim with a magical twist – even if it doesn't have the same level of mainstream recognition as a certain other school of witchcraft and wizardry. ***– Joe Juba***



Hogwarts Legacy

Creating new magic moments

Platform PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC
Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing
Publisher Warner Bros. Games, Portkey Games
Developer Avalanche Software **Release** 2022

The appeal of the Harry Potter universe isn't just about the story of Harry, Ron, and Hermione; the setting itself captures people's imaginations. It's fun to envision yourself as part of that magical world – shopping at Diagon Alley, watching Quidditch, and (of course) going to school. Hogwarts Legacy taps into that desire to be among witches and wizards, letting players experience student life while exploring Hogwarts and beyond.

Set in the 1800s' Wizarding World, this open-world action/RPG from developer Avalanche Software (Disney Infinity) takes place long before Harry Potter was even born. As a result, players won't see many familiar faces around Hogwarts, but the game still has plenty of touchstones from the franchise. For example, your wizard or witch will don the Sorting Hat and be placed in one of Hogwarts' four houses – and that's just the beginning.

Players cast spells, brew potions, and even visit the nearby village of Hogsmeade. Previous games based on this franchise have attempted to harness these elements, but were often limited by the events of the films. The 2007 game adaptation of Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix gave players a tantalizing glimpse of what an open-world Hogwarts game could be, but ultimately didn't deliver the full fantasy because of an obligation to follow a predetermined plot.

That's what makes Hogwarts Legacy so full of potential; by telling an original story (Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling is not directly involved in the game), the team at Avalanche Software can give players free rein to inhabit this world and interact with it. So forget your dull muggle life and get ready to get the magical education of your dreams. ***– Joe Juba***

Chorus

Hunting for redemption

Years ago, Nara was the prophet's right hand, enacting the will of a galaxy-spanning cult by using mystical powers and striking against its enemies with extreme prejudice. When her religious fervor finally escalated to bring about the death of an entire world, she was forced to face the terrible consequences of her actions, and alongside her sentient fighter ship, she fled to the far corners of space. But no one can outrun their past, and now she must reclaim the awful powers she once wielded to strike back at the master she once served.

Chorus swings big on its story, laying out a grand narrative redemption arc for its lead that recalls sweeping space operas. But the lead character isn't the only one seeking redemption; the arcade-style space shooter, once a staple of the gaming scene, has had a rough go in recent years, and is in need of a fresh revival. Few games even step up to the line and a mere handful strike the bullseye. To hit the mark, developer Fishlabs is rethinking the rules of space combat, drawing on modern progression and design, and crafting a new sci-fi universe for players to discover.

At first glance, Chorus calls to mind games from an entirely different era in video games, in which space shooters aspired to the type of action and intensity you might see in the dogfights of Star Wars films, filled with near misses, nimble craft weaving around each other, and hails of laser fire. Today, many of the most popular space-combat games lean toward simulation, but that's not what Fishlabs is interested in. "We were taking inspiration from games like Freelancer and Wing Commander," says creative director Marek Burka. "That's the very deep root of where we are coming from. And we were focusing on evolution, and not revolution." Fishlabs has a history exploring space combat in the mobile-gaming space, but with the added horsepower and more intent player base of home consoles and PC, Chorus is the team's most ambitious approach to the genre.

As I start playing an early version of the game, the first few minutes feel like a graphically enhanced take on the classics that inspired it, but the evolved gameplay shows itself soon enough. "We wanted something very adrenaline-focused and quick-paced," Burka says. "To get a focus on speed, we built the game with lots of close proximity of structures – providing that sense of danger and needing to dare." The opening areas prove that out, as I am dropped into a sequence that sees protagonist Nara on a scrounging mission, looking for power cells to bring back to her adopted home – a space station where she has settled in recent years.

Level geometry and structures seem to close in on all sides, whether you are exploring the interior of an ancient derelict or out among the asteroid field that lies beyond. Long, twisting corridors demand a risk/reward consideration; the sense of speed is intoxicating when I lay on the boost, but I'm always just barely dodging out of the way of a crash.

Spoken dialogue is a consistent accompaniment. Nara regularly hops onto comms to chat with other individuals in nearby stations and ships, and even as the early missions teach the player about combat, progression, and navigation, Nara's backstory begins to take shape.

Nara has some truly dark deeds in her past. As a member of the Chorus, she was second in power and command only to the enigmatic prophet who leads the sprawling space cult. An elite group called the Circle helped to maintain the Chorus' grip on control, and in service to that purpose, Nara has access to tremendous power. "We wanted to give the main character a spin, which could trigger deeper backstory," Burka says. "That led us to this dark realm – this sort of space dark magic that Nara practices."

Those powers manifest as rites, which are mystical or spiritual acts that allow Nara to complete the impossible. Seven years ago, she called on those rites to wipe an entire planet of life. Seeing the devastation wrought by her

Platform PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Stadia, PC **Style** 1-Player Shooter **Publisher** Deep Silver **Developer** Fishlabs **Release** 2021

Each large zone is visually distinct and open to exploration, and can be revisited even after the story moves on

own actions and the corruption of the cult, she departed into a self-imposed exile, taking with her the sentient spaceship named Forsaken that she partnered with and flew into battle. As the game begins, her former life has caught up to her, and she reclaims Forsaken from where she abandoned him, along with her powers, to fight against her former allies.

Nara's rites and connection to her ship aren't just narrative conveniences. Instead, they represent one of the chief ways that Fishlabs is innovating within this genre. The Rite of the Senses sends out a pulse of energy, identifying points of interest, hidden items, and uncovering memories of the places you pass. Functionally, it acts as a story revealer, opening up dialogue and history for the places you visit.

The Rite of the Hunt, meanwhile, helps solve for one of the most frustrating aspects of arcade shooters: chasing after enemy ships in an endless circle. Using this power, Nara and her ship can target an enemy vessel, and with a button press, teleport directly behind the opponent, ready to bullseye. Players also gain access to the Rite of the Storm, which disrupts areas of corruption you encounter in your exploration, and serves as an EMP to knock out nearby small ships.

Once Nara retrieves her companion ship, players also acquire another intriguing option – the ability to drift. Like a car taking a sharp corner in a racing game, you can first boost in a direction, then tap and hold drift to maintain momentum even as you freely rotate on your ship's internal axis. It allows for split-second turning, as well as long strafing runs in which you turn your forward weapons on targets as you pass them.

Weapons subscribe to a familiar-but-satisfying loop that demands consistent switching during the course of a battle. "When it comes to the combat, it's very aimed at the triangle of weapons," Burka says. "A sort of rock-paper-scissors take on the process." Your Gatling gun hammers down a ship's hull in a matter of seconds. A laser drops enemy shields, and its single instantaneous blast is a great sniping tool. The missile launcher fires off unguided projectiles that do a number on armored units.

Add all these components together, and the battles feel quite engaging. Objects and environmental features clustered around your ship constantly demand attention, and make combat feel just shy of claustrophobic, but in a tense and exciting way. The rites, along with drifting, speed up the chase, and your ability to bring down whole squadrons quickly. And the weapon switching demands observation and varied attack patterns.

Outside of battle, RPG systems encourage investment, spread across multiple aspects of play. Return to stations to dock, and you can use earned credits to buy ship upgrades, improving hull and shields, switching out weapons within each of the three main categories, and slotting in mods. Acquired equipment comes in increasingly hard-to-get rarities, and the highest-tier gear can feature set bonuses. While rites are acquired naturally over the critical path of the story, the enhancements you can get for each are not. Additional exploration might yield dramatic enhancements to powers, or a twist on how they work. "You can get to a state where the Rite of the Hunt allows you to jump again if you score a kill," Burka explains. "So, if you're skilled enough, you're able to create a chain kill." Finally, the game also encourages progression through mastery. Use a specific tool or skill – like the Gatling gun, or firing while using drift – and you gradually improve mastery with it. Mastery has multiple levels, and rewards increase power when using your preferred playstyles and approaches to combat.

While blistering space battles are a big aspect of what Chorus is trying to accomplish, the team is also looking to modern takes on exploration to inform the moments between each fight. Like in a free-roaming action game, players are free to flit back and forth along the main story thread, but they contend with regular calls to engage with side content. "We don't call it fully open-world," Burka says. "It's more like semi-open-world. The area you initially explore, while quite significantly large, is still finite. It's not like you can go wherever you want and explore thousands of systems."

The initial area I explored was the asteroid ring surrounding a massive planet. It was many kilometers across, but filled with smaller missions. I could race to a nearby temple and retrieve the first of my mystical rites. But along the way, I was lured into scanning old drone data to find out how a lost ship had been destroyed. Later, I helped clear debris around a fuel depot. Some events, like these static sites, offered discrete rewards and increased investment in understanding the universe. But dynamic events also cropped up, with more random encounters against ships, informed by my previous actions. Enemies in an area might be hostile at first until I retook the local station; afterward, the nearby ships might be allies.

As my time in the early build neared an end, I completed a major beat in the story, and a jump gate opened to a new area – an entirely new stretch of space to explore. So, instead of a single open world, Chorus is structured around an ever-expanding set of large explorable and visually unique zones, while still allowing for a return to all your previous locations.

Chorus is slated to release later in 2021, and the team still has many elements and features to implement. Even so, I came away from my few hours of spaceflight with enthusiasm, feeling like Fishlabs has successfully captured a mix of arcade-style space action, sci-fi mystery, and overtones of mystical questioning that hint at larger metaphysical issues. If the developer can nail the aesthetic and lock in a tight loop of engaging exploration and space combat, Chorus could appeal to a whole generation of older players hungry for space dogfights, and maybe draw in a new generation of fans along the way.

– Matt Miller

Fast boosting and sharp turning lend an action flair to combat and exploration

Returnal

A vicious cycle

Platform PS5 **Style** 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** Housemarque **Release** April 30

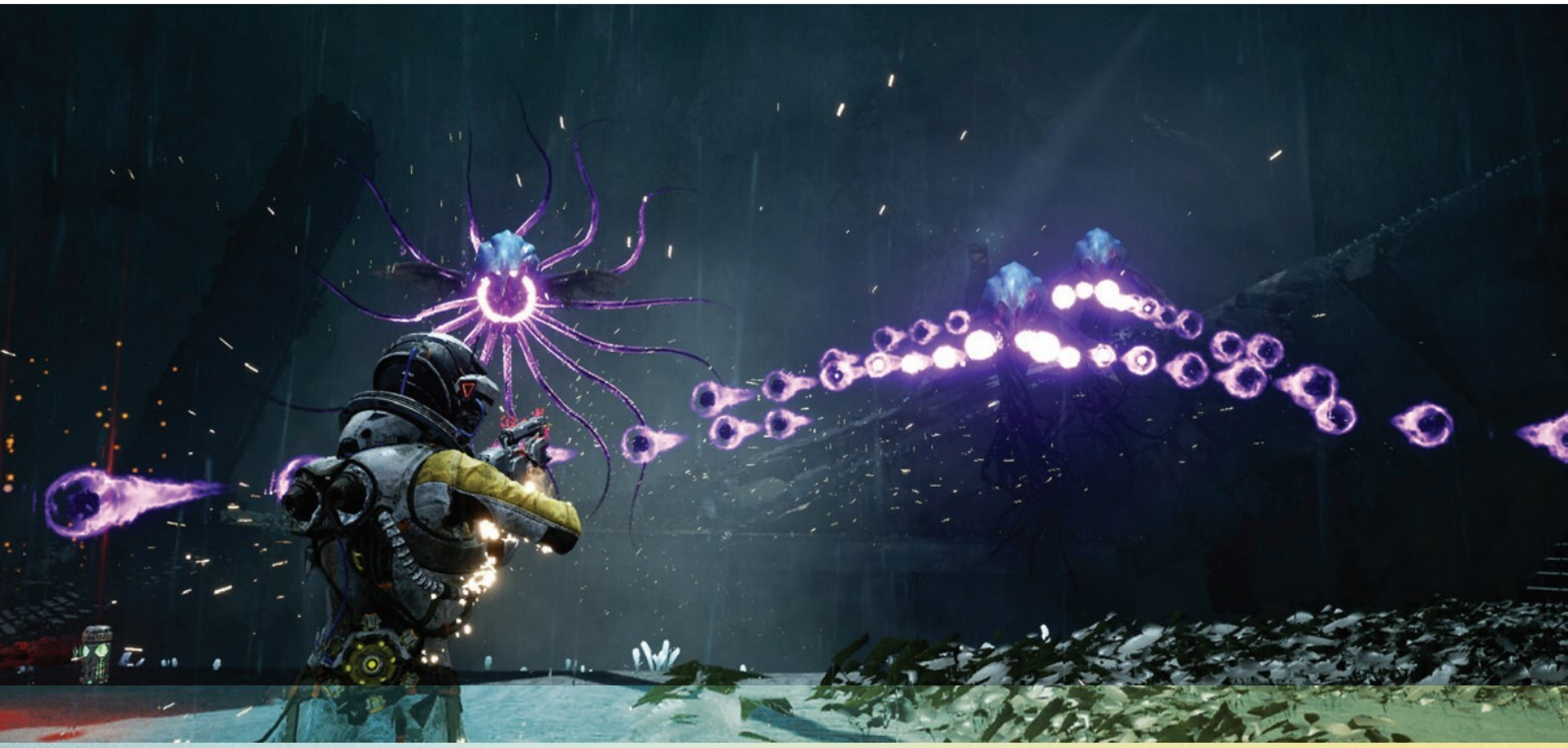
Housemarque may not be a name that immediately stands out amongst the industry giants, but the studio has earned a healthy respect thanks to high-quality titles like Super Stardust HD, Outland, Resogun, and Nex Machina. Returnal marks the biggest step for the studio yet, ditching the arcade focus in favor of a triple-A, story-driven action game. As one of the PlayStation 5's first major exclusives, there's a lot of excitement surrounding Returnal. We've been impressed by what we've seen so far and are champing at the bit to learn more about this fascinating title.

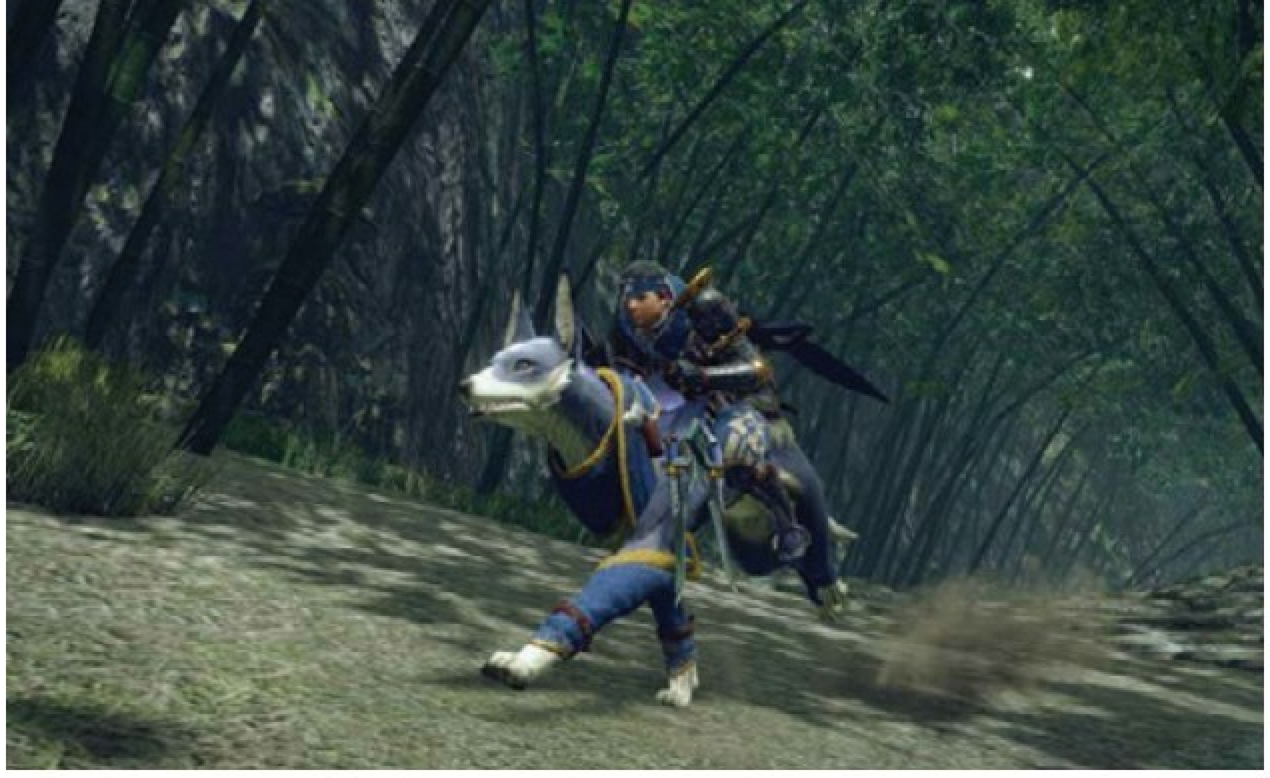
Returnal is a third-person, sci-fi action romp starring Selene, an Astra space scout who crash lands on a shape-shifting alien planet. As if being isolated in a hostile world wasn't bad enough, Selene finds herself caught in a mysterious time loop where she's forced to relive previous events every time she dies (think *Edge of Tomorrow*). Escaping means becoming intimately familiar with the decaying planet itself, and Selene must recover fragments of her memory to find the answers she needs. The premise may be familiar, but that doesn't make it any less intriguing – and we're excited to see how and why the world is affecting Selene in this manner.

That loop serves as the core of Returnal's roguelike structure. The procedurally generated world takes new forms each time Selene is reborn. Thanks to the PlayStation 5's SSD, beginning a new cycle is a near-instantaneous process. Since Selene starts from scratch with each run, players must carefully manage resources to make the most out of every loop. We don't know much about how progression works, but we do know Selene will scavenge alien tech, which could suggest a crafting system. Players will have to experiment with multiple combinations of loadouts to find a setup that takes them furthest into the game before, inevitably, biting the dust once more.

The third-person gunplay pits players against a bizarre array of alien adversaries, including glowing tentacled beasts and multi-armed, diamond-headed sentries. Combat often involves dodging bullet-hell waves; a fun nod to Housemarque's arcade roots. Each weapon has an alternate firing mode with the adaptive triggers helping players switch seamlessly between aiming down sights and swapping artillery. Guns aren't the only weapons in Selene's arsenal, as trailers have shown her slicing foes apart with sword-like weapons as well. Returnal's advanced 3D audio allows players to pick up on nearby enemies as well as ambient noises even during the quietest moments.

Housemarque has long proven itself as a reliable developer, and we can't wait to see how Returnal allows the studio to apply its expertise in a blockbuster mold. The action looks sharp and frantic, the exotic world and particle effects pop on screen, the enemies look great, and the mystery itself has our interest piqued.
– Marcus Stewart





Monster Hunter Rise

Hunting monsters and riding dogs

Platform Switch **Style** 1-Player Action (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** March 26

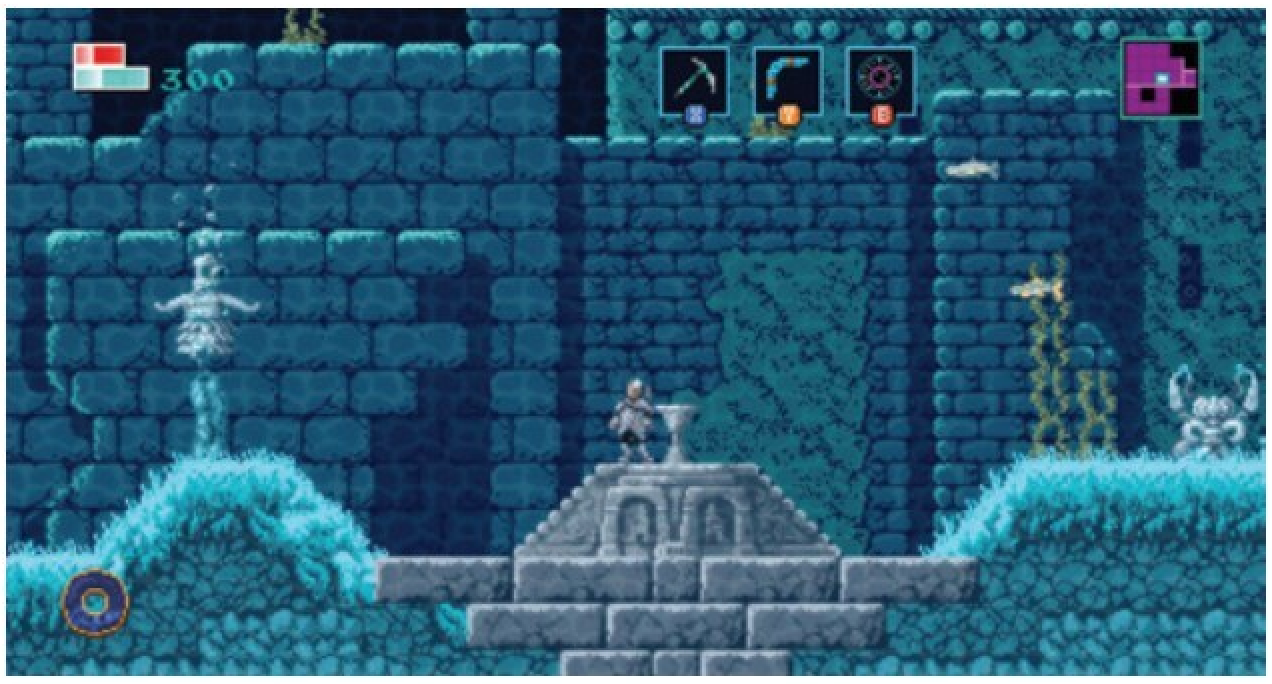
Building on a framework set by Monster Hunter: World, in Monster Hunter Rise, players can embark on a fresh adventure with a smorgasbord of monsters, old and new. Many aspects from MH:W are expanded on here, allowing players unprecedented mobility and new attack options via the Wirebug. You also have some new companion options alongside the classic feline Palico with the canine Palamute. Not only are these scrappy pups amazing fighters that will combo with your strikes, you can ride them to get around maps much faster. On top of that, there's no loading screens between zones.As always, I'm looking forward to taking on the biggest beasts and crafting the hottest gear whenever a Monster Hunter title arrives. ***– Daniel Tack***

Axiom Verge 2

Before and after

Platform Switch **Style** 1-Player Action **Publisher** Thomas Happ Games **Developer** Thomas Happ Games **Release** 2021

The original Axiom Verge was a Metroid-inspired indie hit, and Axiom Verge 2 is poised to continue the retro-fueled fun. It stars a new hero named Indra, but remains connected to the original story. In fact, Axiom Verge 2 is both a sequel and a prequel to Trace's adventure in the first game. Cool abilities, sci-fi weapons, and strange enemies are just some of the things players can look forward to. Axiom Verge delivered a fun fusion of 2D exploration, clever combat, and haunting atmosphere; we can't wait to see how this follow-up builds on that foundation while adding its own surprises. ***– Joe Juba***



Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart

Adding new dimensions

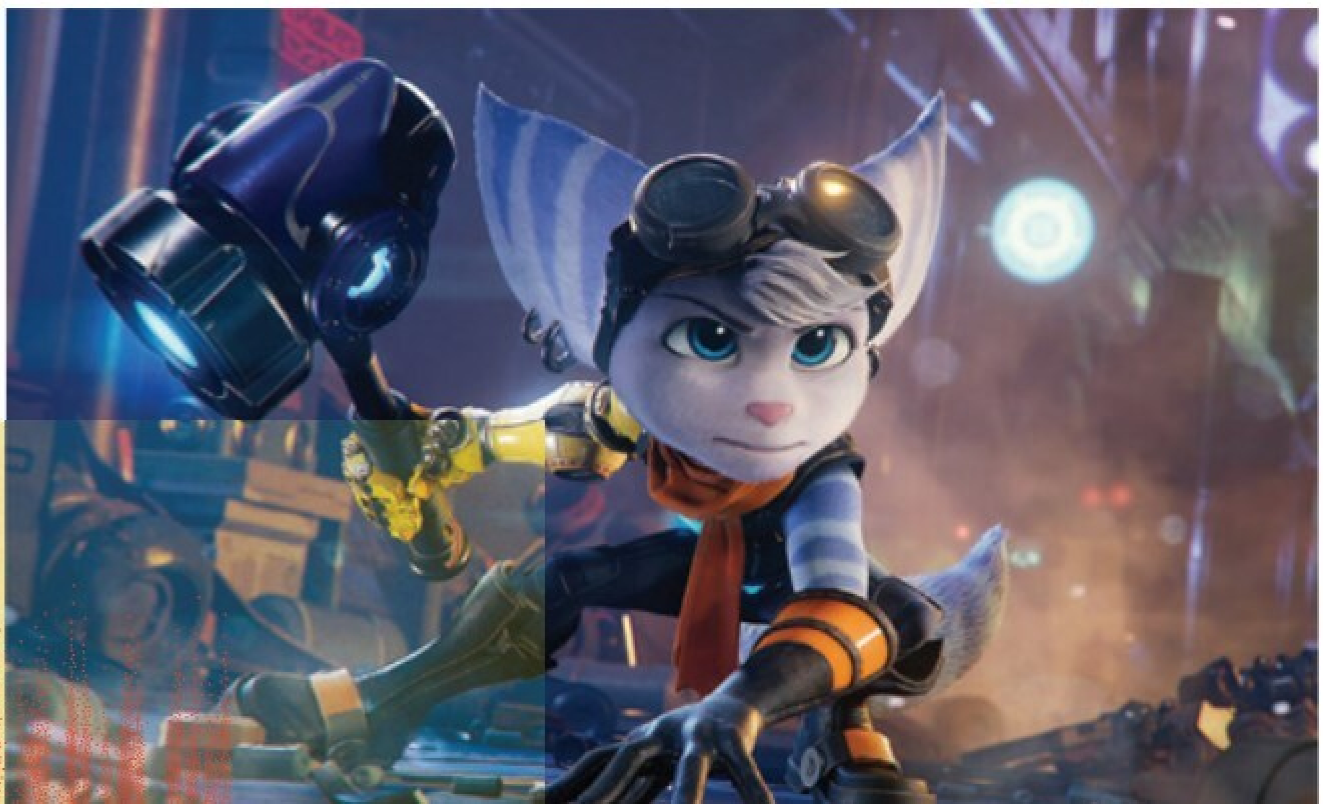
Platform PS5 **Style** 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** Insomniac Games **Release** 2021

Throughout the promotional cycle of the PlayStation 5, Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart was trotted out as one of the main examples of the power of Sony's new system. Not simply visually vibrant, Rift Apart's main hook during the PS5 demoes was its ability to leverage the speed of the SSD to leap through portals and load massive, dense worlds instantly.

However, Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart is far more than a novelty tech demo for PlayStation 5. Built on the solid foundation of Insomniac's long-running series, Rift Apart brings the same level of zany weaponry, over-the-top action, and colorful characters fans have come to expect from the franchise. With the PS5, players get those near-instant load times, allowing for the new portal-hopping gameplay mechanic using Ratchet's new Rift Tether. Additionally, the PS5 also brings 3D spatial audio, ray-tracing, and special immersive features using the DualSense controller's capabilities.

Navigating these worlds as everyone's favorite lombax, Ratchet, and his computerized co-star Clank is exciting enough for long-time fans, but this entry introduces a new playable female lombax. We've only caught glimpses of other members of the lombax race over the series' nearly two-decade history, so fans should be intrigued to learn more about Ratchet's species. We don't know much about her (not even her name), but she wields a hammer that will hopefully carry on the series' legacy of fun combat with an arsenal of the unexpected.

Originally scheduled as a launch window title for PS5, Insomniac's newest entry in the series seems like it might come a bit later than that. If it delivers on the same exciting elements we've come to expect from the franchise, it'll be worth the wait. ***– Brian Shea***



Diablo Immortal

A mobile monster mash

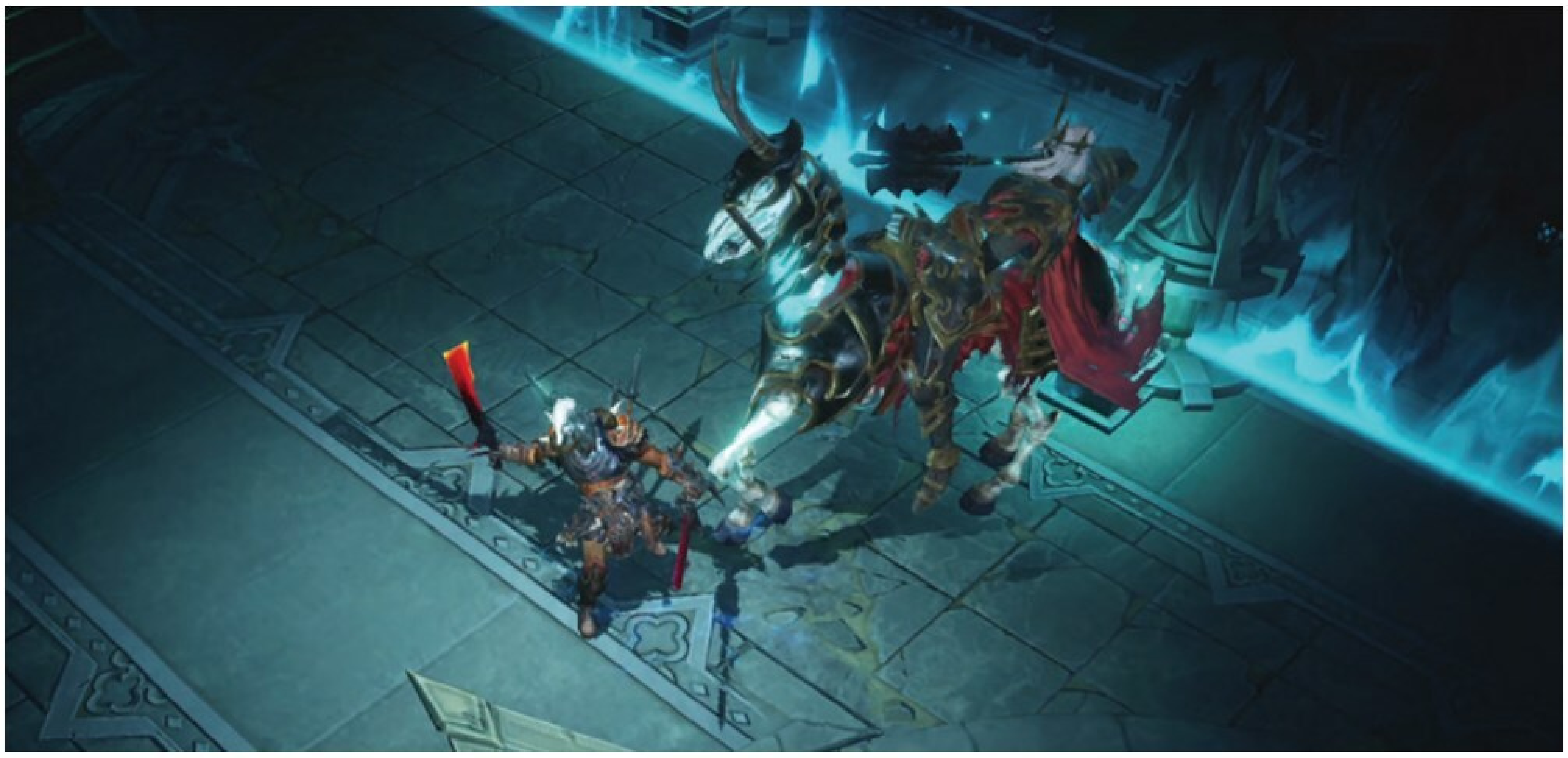
Platform iOS, Android **Style** 1 to 4-Player Online Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Blizzard Entertainment **Developer** Blizzard Entertainment **Release** 2021

Diablo Immortal is primed to land on mobile devices this year, allowing loot hunters to smash, dash, and boss-bash on their phones. While the initial reveal of Diablo Immortal was not received well and early builds did little to impress, the recent technical alpha proved that many of Diablo's fun facets can in fact succeed in a mobile environment.

Because Diablo Immortal occupies sacred space between Diablo II and Diablo III canonically, fans get the best of both worlds. Deckard Cain is still around, so we can stay awhile and listen. The Countess is a badass boss we can continue farming forever. The jibbering Fetish Army that we dreaded facing off against in the jungles of Diablo II is back, conjuring up pint-sized terror. Even cooler, we get nods to connective-tissue story beats that tie the games together. Have you ever teamed up with Zoltun Kulle and Tal Rasha to take on Baal? You can! Without any other spoilery stuff, it's beyond clear that the team behind Diablo Immortal decided to lean in on nostalgia, lore, and fan favorites to create an awesome cast of allies and villains.

In that broad basket, the currently accepted ARPG mechanic of procedurally generated levels is still a big component. Once you've gone through the quests and campaign, there are always rifts to do. They were a staple of Diablo III, and they're a staple here. The concept of dungeon and boss runs coexists side-by-side with rifting in Diablo Immortal, and that's a smart choice that freshens up the cycle of endless runs. From Diablo III to Path of Exile to Torchlight III, the endgame of ARPGs is currently defined by randomized tilesets with all manner of modifiers and encounters. Dungeon runs, endless rifts, and paragon levels ensure you have plenty of end-game creatures to crush, and you can even team up with your friends (or randoms) to take on challenging heroic encounters together.

Diablo Immortal also moves the genre forward in convenient and cool ways, like letting you transfer your item upgrades by slot. What does this mean? Well, if you find an awesome legendary pair of boots and you find a new one that's even better, it was traditionally a pain and a resource sink to get the new pair up to speed via rerolling and enchanting. Now, you can keep the modifiers in the slot when you stick a new piece in. Upgraded your rare pants all the way up, stacked with strength and vitality? King Leoric drop you a new piece? Your new gear is just a swap away, and your buffs stick with the slot if you choose. This is a great feature that I hope becomes a mainstay for Diablo (and other ARPGs).



Yes, your move sets are somewhat limited compared to what you'd find in a full-fledged console or PC release, with easy-to-use abilities and touch controls, but there's still a wide variety of legendary items with special effects to complement whichever playstyle you end up embracing. As with any free-to-play mobile game, I'm wary of the monetization model, but we won't know how that will play out until the game launches, so cautious optimism tempers my anticipation for now. Like most major games today, there's a battle pass as well.

If you're going to write off Diablo Immortal because it's a mobile game and you're waiting for Diablo IV, I get it. I think you should do a few Countess runs first, but I understand that we all want a new "core" Diablo experience. But as someone who wasn't interested in the slightest upon my first look, I'm inevitably going to tear up a whole lot of demonic forces when Diablo Immortal launches.

– Daniel Tack

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Taxi Chaos
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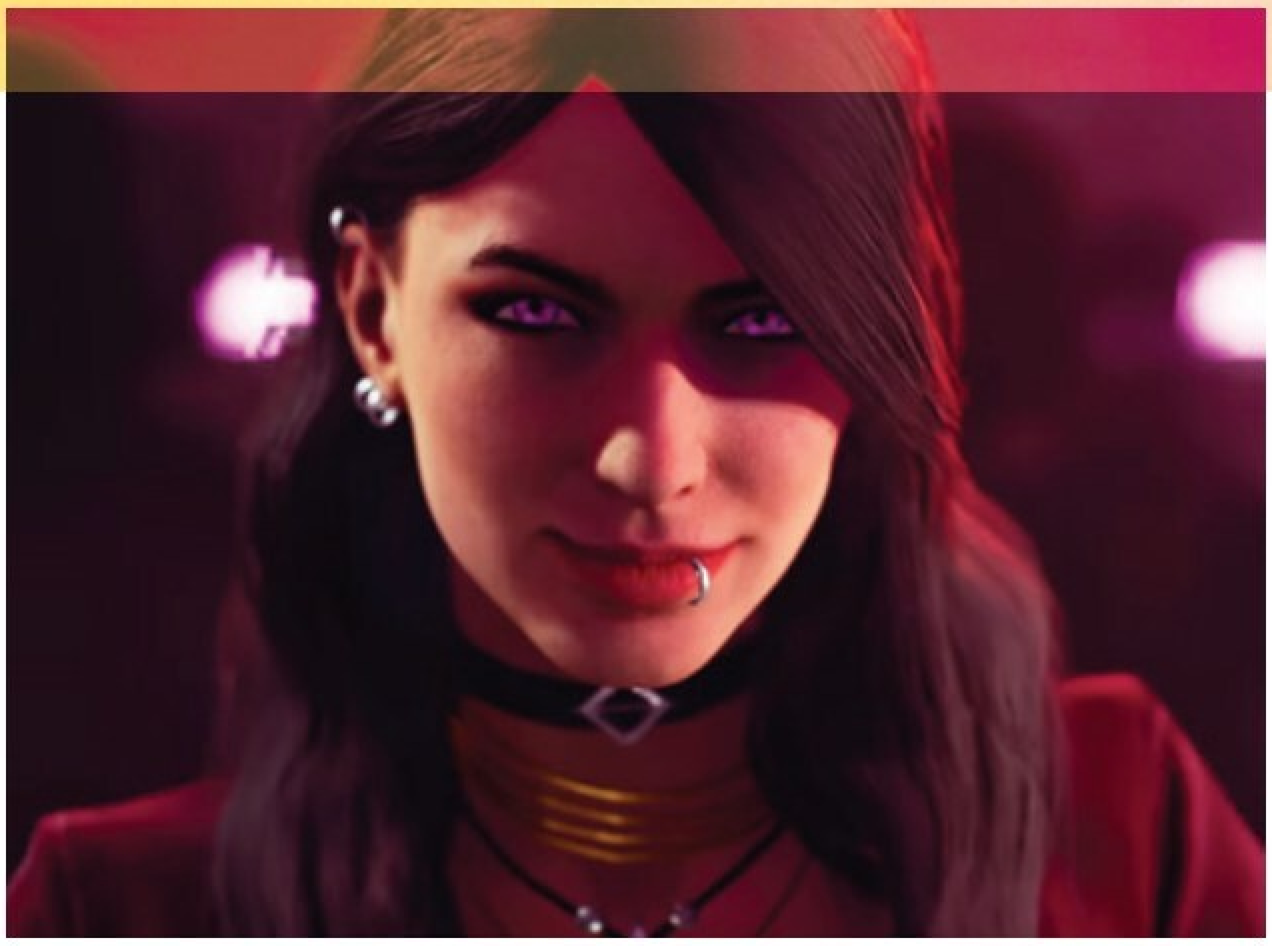


Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2

A delicious (im)mortal conundrum

Platform PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC
Style 1-Player Action/RPG **Publisher** Paradox Interactive
Developer Hardsuit Labs Inc. **Release** 2021

Vampire: The Masquerade is one of the most invigorating and thoroughly realized vampire tales out there, combing through the world of its tabletop roots for an exquisite video game experience. The first Bloodlines, released in 2004, took that tabletop experience and spun it into pure role-playing gold, heavy with nuanced themes and intriguing characters. Bloodlines 2 aims to continue on that heady experience, taking players to even darker places, where every choice has a consequence and each decision could be the last.

Vampire stories are nothing new, but they are an interesting representation of the darker aspects of humanity. Trying to find meaning, coming to terms with the fact that we evolve a thousand times during our lifetimes, and also trying to temper the line of "I want to be better" versus "I really can't stand you people" in the most tactical way. Vampirism has long since been a metaphor for what it means to be human without the rose-colored glasses, but few pull this off quite as well as The Masquerade.

The first Bloodlines game did not fail when it came to a powerful narrative and a solid RPG experience. The world was so colorful despite its bleak nature, rife with subplots and intrigue. With Paradox Interactive and Hardsuit Labs taking the helm of the upcoming sequel, seeing that same world brought to life with Unreal Engine 4 and modern-day graphics is an exciting adventure to look forward to.

Death, magic, and the fight for control? Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2 thrusts us into the world of vampirism when the player character is sired for the sole purpose of sending a terroristic message. Confused, powerful, and utterly hungry, Bloodlines 2 urges the notion of fighting forward no matter what. You can join up with a wide variety of clans that offer their own unique take of power – at the risk of angering opposing factions, of course – while uncovering a sinister conspiracy that lies deep beneath Seattle's underbelly.

Bloodlines 2 aims to take the world of the first game and its tabletop sire to new heights, and with the power of new-gen consoles and PC? Those heights look deliciously delightful.
– Liana Ruppert

Little Nightmares II

An unsettling sequel

Platform PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, Android, PC
Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Bandai Namco
Developer Tarsier Studios **Release** February 11

Little Nightmares took survival-horror staples like grotesquely designed creatures, darkened passageways, and atmospheric soundscapes and ratcheted up the tension with a simple addition: You were a helpless child. Even the so-called "everyman" heroes in horror games seem to have a preternatural familiarity with firearms when it comes time to fight. The raincoat-clad girl Six wasn't so lucky. Instead, she had to lay low, sneaking past enemies and darting away if they noticed her presence. In Little Nightmares II, she's passing along the torch to a new kid, Mono.

In earlier looks at the game, Mono's face was obscured by his paper-sack mask. In a recent hands-on demo I was surprised to find that there are other cosmetic options lurking in the shadows. For instance, after an hour or so I was able to switch between yellow rain hats, coonskin caps, and even a hollowed-out ball with eye holes cut into it. They're minor, but satisfying, rewards for braving the dark and exploring every nook and cranny. Considering that every misstep can end in death, it's nice to have a reason to linger longer than necessary.

Little Nightmares II is at its most effective when you don't know what exactly is around the corner. With that in mind, I'll keep the specifics at a minimum. I will say that the concept of oversized "adults" that often menaced Six in the first game returns, along with the sensation that you're being stalked by something that you're completely powerless against. Fortunately, you're not alone this time. ***– Jeff Cork***

Back 4 Blood

Slaying with a full deck

Platform PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC **Style** 1-Player Shooter (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Warner Bros. Games
Developer Turtle Rock Studios **Release** June 21

There's a moment from Left 4 Dead 2 that will never leave my memory: During the Dark Carnival level, players can find a garden gnome, aka Gnome Chompski, and bring him to the helicopter at the finale, all in the name of achievement points. After attaining the seemingly pleasant statue, Chompski takes up your weapon slot and forces you to fight through the ravenous horde with nothing but his insidious little body as your defense. Initiating the finale, I was downed by the unrelenting stream of Boomers and Tanks just as the helicopter arrived. As my world burned around me and my friends escaped, the only thing I could see was that accursed gnome staring deeply into my soul as I failed to unlock the achievement. To this day, my friends and I still talk about that moment amongst the other amazing times we had playing the Left 4 Dead series.

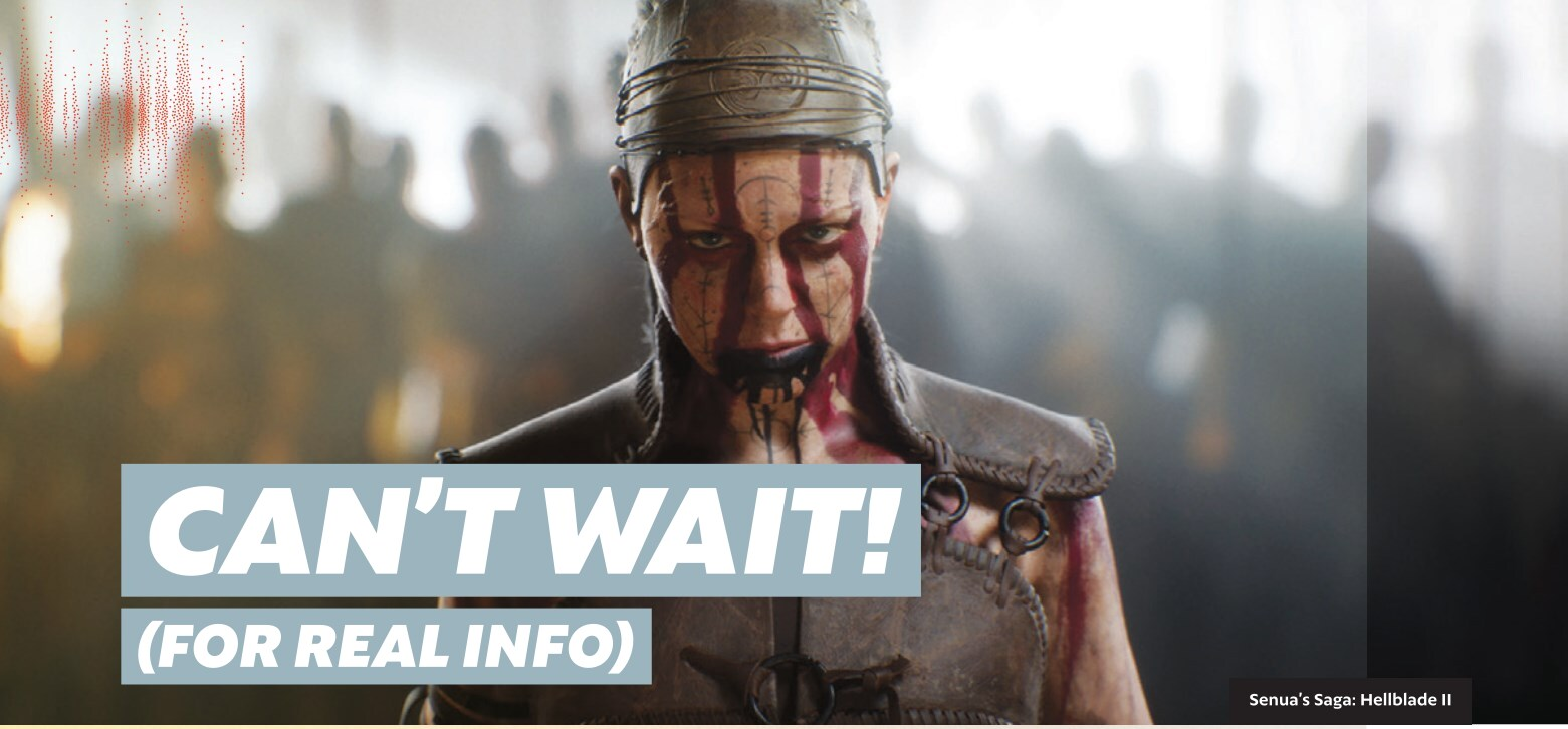
I've been chasing that high ever since, and while it's early, Back 4 Blood has me hopeful that Turtle Rock Studios can recapture those watercooler thrills.

The original team behind Left 4 Dead is heading back to its roots, and is unsatisfied with just rehashing the past. The draw this time is the deck-building system that tasks players with utilizing cards in a way that makes them zombie-slaying machines. These cards can offer incremental boosts to your health and stamina, or they can provide more tangible effects such as unlimited ammo for a secondary weapon. At first, during my time with the game's alpha, I bristled at the idea, but I found myself enamored with the synergies these cards create and how much it helped my team conquer Act 1's finale.

You aren't the only one with a hand to play, though. The A.I. director uses its own set of cards to challenge you and halt your progress. Throughout our game sessions, we saw everything from armored zombies to the hulking Ogre appear multiple times in new areas. The director keeps the moment-to-moment gameplay thrilling and pushes players to work together when building their decks if they want to emerge victorious. My only issue with the new system is some of the card bonuses need to be buffed if they're to be considered viable in the long run.

While the deck system remains one of the alpha's highlights, its innovations would be for naught if Back 4 Blood wasn't also fun to play. Turtle Rock once again flexes its FPS prowess and creates masterful moments of gunplay and striking enemy types. The distinct weapons feel great and administer that electric punch needed for a fun time slaying the undead. While Left 4 Dead fans will be familiar with the specialty zombies in Back 4 Blood, the variety of Retches, Ogres, and Tall Boys kept us on our toes and made for some memorable moments. However, there were times when the undead waves felt overpowered, as we were unable to reload our weapons, let alone complete our mission.

Can Back 4 Blood recreate the emergent thrills of its predecessor? Time will tell, but Turtle Rock has made a great first impression with its return to the sub-genre it pioneered, making Back 4 Blood one of my most anticipated games of 2021. ***– Alex Stadnik***



CAN'T WAIT!

(FOR REAL INFO)

Senua's Saga: Hellblade II

Some games garner excitement purely through the knowledge that they exist. While these games certainly have us enthralled, there's barely any info out there to shape that enthusiasm into clear expectations. Here are some of the games we're most thrilled to have on the horizon, even if we know next to nothing about them.

Bayonetta 3

It's been years since new details have emerged on Bayonetta's next stiletto-clad outing, other than confirmation in 2020 that the game is still in active development. As one of the most tightly balanced and engaging stylish action series ever, the third installment's promised Switch exclusivity remains a feather in Nintendo's cap.

Senua's Saga: Hellblade II

Ninja Theory has remained mostly quiet about the next chapter in Senua's emotionally fraught story. The original game was celebrated both for its stunning art direction and deft handling of mental illness. An early look suggests both are still focal points, and the in-engine footage makes it clear that this title should be an impressive tour de force for the Xbox Series X and PC.

God of War

With PS5s in the wild, players are hungry to see a game really put the new console through its paces. If the striking beauty of 2018's God of War is any indication, the console may get just that through the announced sequel, which focuses on the coming of the cataclysmic Ragnarok. We know very little about the game, but it's easy to go out on a limb and predict that Kratos may continue to struggle with anger issues.

Darkest Dungeon II

Red Hook Studios has earned the anticipation that simmers around this sequel. The team's first strategy roguelike deftly combined atmospheric dungeon crawling with a deeply rewarding loop of play. The dark storytelling is set to return with this brand-new entry, hitting early access in 2021, but the bleak paths that players are set to trod upon remain unrevealed.

Perfect Dark

The Initiative was founded by an impressive team of industry veterans to tackle major new projects for Microsoft, but until now we didn't know for sure what the studio was up to. This reboot of the venerable secret-agent franchise has a lot of potential, but it also needs to zero out concerns left behind by a questionable 2005 reboot that attempted to do the same.

Pragmata

A stunning announcement trailer in 2020 offered more questions than answers about Capcom's latest opus. A spacesuit-clad astronaut saves a little girl with strange powers, as a massive space station crashes to Earth, and both mysteriously end up on the moon. Your guess is as good as ours, but we know to watch for the game in 2022 when it arrives for PS5, Xbox Series X/S, and PC.

The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild 2

With only a 2019 trailer to fuel conspiracy theories, all we know for sure is that this is a direct sequel to the first game, with a darker tone, which follows the same Zelda and Link players loved in the beloved 2017 release. Here's hoping Nintendo pulls the curtain back later this year.

Fable

The most intriguing thing to know about the new Fable is who is developing it. Playground Games is known for its standout racing game work, most recently on the gorgeous Forza Horizon 4. While it may seem a strange fit, the team's racing games show a practiced eye for open-world structuring, RPG progression, and beautiful environments, which are all elements we'd love to see come together in a new-gen Fable.

Ark II

Monstrous prehistoric tribesmen? Futuristic tech? Dinosaurs? Sounds like a job for Vin Diesel, who both stars in and acts as executive producer on this sequel to Ark: Survival Evolved. The survival experience is set to hit first as an Xbox console exclusive in 2022.

Elden Ring

The collaboration between fantasy novelist George R.R. Martin and Dark Souls creator Hidetaka Miyazaki has fans abuzz, but there's an awful lot we don't know about the project. Promised as an open-world fantasy action/RPG, it's supposedly From Software's most ambitious game to date. Don't worry, devastating and gargantuan bosses are still very much a part of the equation.

EARLY ACCESS GAMES

YOU SHOULD PLAY RIGHT NOW

In running down all the upcoming games we can't wait to play, we'd be remiss if we didn't include the games we can play in early access. While these games aren't out in their full capacities yet, if you can't wait to play them, you can check out their in-progress versions now. Here's our picks for the five best games you can play now, before their official release.

Ooblets

The cutest game on this list, Ooblets is available to play now through early access on PC and Xbox One. Combining elements of farming simulators with catching and battling creatures, Ooblets is the first game from developer Glumberland, and has received positive attention since it was released in July 2020. We're looking forward to seeing and playing more when the game comes out in full sometime in the future – especially if it comes to Switch, where it feels like a natural fit.

Teardown

Just give me something to break. Teardown is the game we need right now; a game all about destroying things in satisfying fashion. We wrote about Teardown a few issues ago, but to reiterate, we're loving the way it combines its novel "break everything" elevator pitch with the pressure of pulling off mission-based heists. Developed by only one person, Teardown is picking up a lot of steam so far in early access on PC. We can't wait to see how the game evolves over time – and what new stuff we'll be able to smash.

Baldur's Gate 3

The continuation of one of the best RPG series in gaming, you can play Baldur's Gate 3 now on PC and Stadia in early access. In fact, playing the game this way might be your best bet for now; according to developer Larian Studios, the game will remain in early access for at least a year before it's fully released. By sheer metrics alone, Baldur's Gate 3 is shaping up to be a big game. When it was released in early access in October 2020, it was the best-selling game on both Steam and GOG. At its peak, 70,000 concurrent people were playing the game on Steam.

Rogue Legacy 2

As the name implies, Rogue Legacy 2 is a roguelite. But the second word in that name is equally as important. Rogue Legacy 2 features persistent upgrades, meaning even when you start a new run, you're bringing over the powers you unlocked. We've really enjoyed what we've seen of this game's spin on a tried-and-true genre in early access on PC and can't wait to give the full game a spin whenever it comes out in the future.

Grounded

To say we're excited for the future of Grounded might be an understatement. We've been following Obsidian's *Honey I Shrunk the Kids*-like survival game since it was announced in November 2019 (we even wrote a cover story about it for issue 325). Since it entered early access, Grounded has been continuously supported and updated, receiving new monsters, features, and locations in its backyard map. Get in on the ground floor (quite literally, in this case); Grounded can be played in early access on Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, and PC.

Hytale

If you combine Minecraft with Monster Hunter, there's a good chance you get Hytale, the upcoming game from Hypixel Studios. Like the former, Hytale encourages creativity through its building and scripting programs. But those systems are combined with the roleplay fantasy of dragons and a deep world. Right now, we're enjoying how these two disparate parts come together to form a unique take on multiple genres, and we can't wait to see how the community continues to expand the game with their own creations when it eventually comes out in full on PC.

Griftlands

The next game from Klei Entertainment, developer of Mark of the Ninja and Don't Starve, Griftlands has been on our radar since it was revealed at E3 2017. While there's no shortage of rougelike games or deck-builders, Griftlands has our attention due to its wonderful cartoon art style and procedurally generated missions, adding variety to both how we tackle our runs and how we build our decks. No full release date has been given as of this writing, but after its showing in early access, we can't wait to see Griftlands' full potential – especially when it's released on the Switch later this year.

Baldur's Gate 3

It Takes Two

Splitting up, together

Josef Fares is a passionate man. The filmmaker-turned-game-developer's first game, Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons, is a remarkable fable about the power of family. While that game's quality spoke for itself, Fares took to the stage for follow-up A Way Out, memorably taking over Geoff Keighley's 2017 Game Awards broadcast by addressing the camera and saying, in part, 'F--- the Oscars!" It was a profane moment, to be sure, but it also showed Fares' exuberance and natural flair for the outrageous. Hazelight Studios' upcoming project, It Takes Two, tackles the oddly underrepresented subject of love. And after talking to Fares about the co-op adventure, it's clear that he has a lot to say about, well, everything.

"Video games are not always about fun; that's a misconception that many people say, 'Is this fun?'" Fares says. "The best moments of my life in video games haven't been about 'fun.'" The game director and Hazelight founder cites experiences like Journey or moments from the opening sequence in The Last of Us to underscore his point. His own game, Brothers, memorably ends with a powerful moment that clearly isn't meant to be fun. "Some parts of gaming are fun, but I would say that more, depending on the scene, it should be engaging."

That's all to say that It Takes Two starts at a place that is decidedly unfun: the specter of divorce. Cody and May are a married couple who have fallen out of love. Nothing especially heavy has happened, Fares says, but the grind of daily life has worn them down, and they've decided that it might be best to go their separate ways. Their young daughter, Rose, is not a fan of the idea.

"She created these two small dolls and she tries, as kids do, to talk to them and try to affect them somehow, and they magically transform into these dolls in this fantasy world," Fares says. From there, it becomes a journey of discovery, both in how the couple rediscovers what initially brought them together, as well as trying to rediscover how the heck to get back into their regular bodies. They're joined by an anthropomorphic Book of Love, who acts as a sort of relationship guru. It's a cute setup, but Fares and his team at Hazelight are using it as a vehicle for pushing narrative and gameplay as close as they can possibly get.

Building Relationships

Watch the It Takes Two trailer, and it's hard not to get whiplash. It introduces the story conceit, and then flashes a string of gameplay clips together at a frantic pace. That kind of editing style is relatively commonplace in game trailers, but it may be closer to It Takes Two's reality than in many of its contemporaries. Fares recognizes the importance of novelty and surprise in games, and it's something that Hazelight is leaning into in a big way.

"Because we're doing a narrative game, every situation has to reflect what goes on in the game," he says. "So, if the character needs something, it should reflect the gameplay as well. I think in narrative games especially, repetitiveness is super dangerous. Once you have that, you get the feeling sometimes that designers and writers are doing two different games, if you know what I mean."

He takes a slight detour, saying that he's not talking about games that rely on repetition, such as ones where the goal is to level up and upgrade your character. That's another discussion, he says, before sticking in a quick jab: "Because for me, just changing colors and numbers on enemies is just a fake way … I think in 10 years hopefully nobody will do this, just having numbers going up, up, up, up, up."

Fares believes that for a narrative game to be truly successful, there has to be a strong relationship between the story and what players are doing at any given moment. "Whatever the character is going through, it should reflect the gameplay as well," he says. "It's going to be insanely varied. I think we're going to break some kind of world record in the amount of mechanics that we have."

Platform PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC **Style** 2-Player Action **Publisher** EA Originals **Developer** Hazelight Studios **Release** March 26

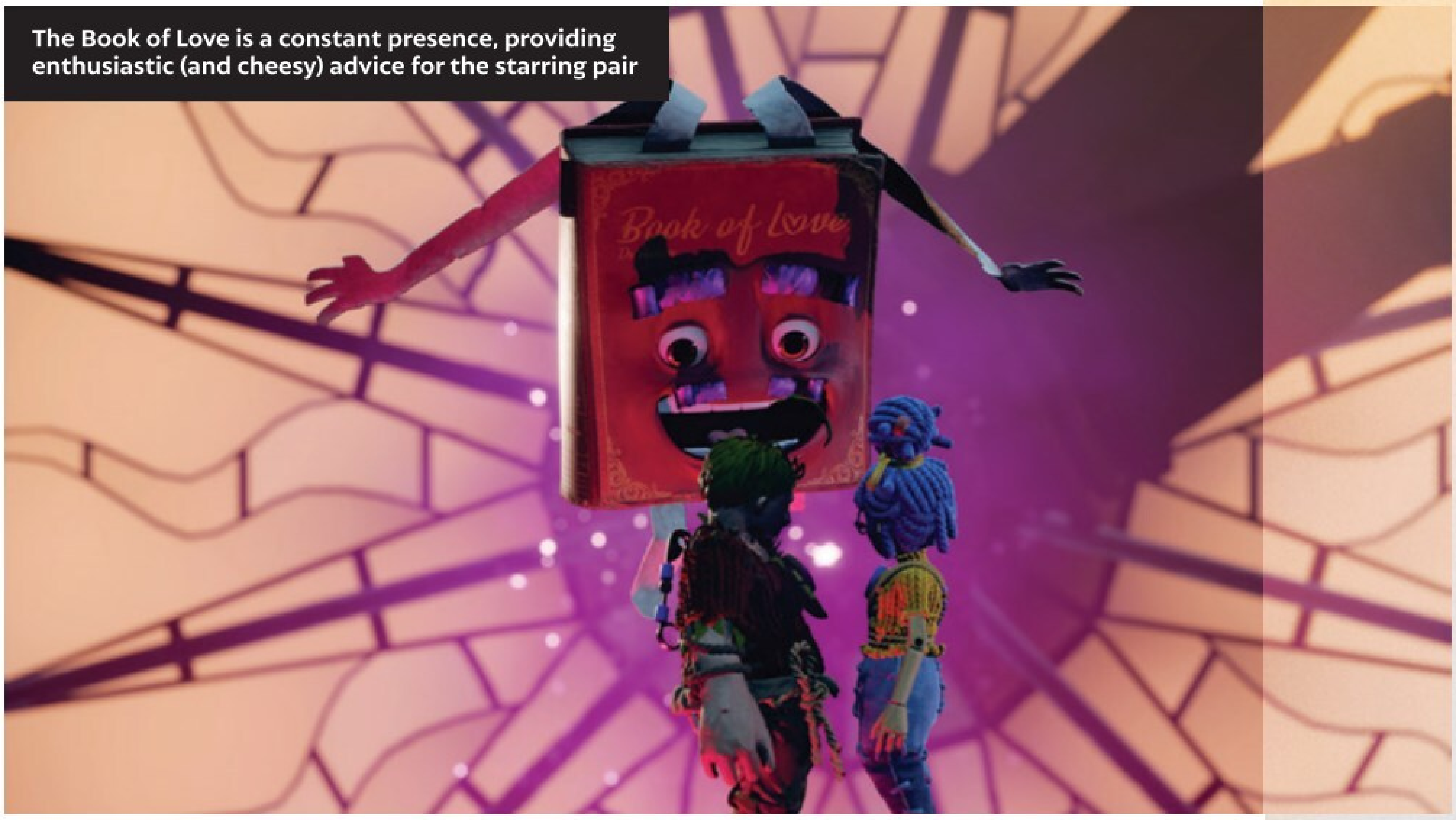
The reality of budgets and timelines makes it tricky to fully avoid repetition, but Hazelight's previous work has shown their willingness to find creative solutions. In A Way Out, for instance, players encounter several obstacles while trying to cooperatively escape from a prison. Rather than have them retrace their steps back every time they run into a locked grate, out-of-reach corridor, or whatever, Fares thought it was important to respect players' time and have the sequences that introduce a problem transition to the problem-solving phase, as might happen in a movie. That's one way to avoid repetition. Another is to gleefully overwhelm players with the sheer amount of stuff they can do.

"For instance, we have a level where they need to work on their attraction; as a couple, they've lost their attraction," Fares says. "And that metaphor for attraction is actually a piece of magnet that we break in two so they have sort of a magnetic attraction to each other. And we have another section where they feel like they don't give each other enough time, as can happen in a relationship." In that section, Cody can temporarily control time, and May – thinking she's spread too thin in her life – can make copies of herself. "We tried to marry those two, so they're connected to their emotional states as well. That's the way we're pushing for this game."

The goal, Fares says, isn't to introduce mechanics and systems that players are expected to fully commit to and master over hours. Instead, his team wants to deliver new ideas and concepts quickly, by having Cody and May (and players) solve the problems they face on their journey from their shed through the various rooms throughout their home. That journey includes fantastical detours, such as a trip into a snow globe that they purchased together on a vacation. In that instance, Fares says there's almost like a city within that glass dome. That sensation of never knowing what's coming next makes for a game that Fares says people won't be able to put down. "I'm really telling you, that's a guarantee. I know I sound very cocky all the time, but that's a guarantee. It's very important for a narrative game."

Cody and May's marriage is falling apart, but their daughter, Rose, is determined to bring them back together

Players will experience the action via different gameplay mechanics, depending on the character they're playing



The Book of Love is a constant presence, providing enthusiastic (and cheesy) advice for the starring pair

Unfinished Business

Fares wants people to get together with a friend or partner and enjoy It Takes Two – it can't be played solo, after all. But he also wants them to finish the game. "I know people came up to me and said, 'Wow it's fantastic that 51 percent of players in A Way Out finished the game,' and they told me that that's an extremely high percentage number, but actually it saddens me. That means that 49 percent of people didn't finish it. It's not something I should be happy about.

"Every journalist right now needs to stop writing replayabilty, because we need to fix the problem that people are not even finishing our games. People are not even finishing the games. Listen to how sick this is: It's so sick that the developers and publishers are literally focusing on the first piece of the game, because they know that's what people will play. This is a mass psychosis going on!"

Hazelight's focus on variety and telling an engaging story that ties into what players are doing is the studio's way of trying to hook players along through to the closing credits. It's not delivering open worlds ("I call them 'open-repetition games,'" Fares jokes), but instead creating highly varied and more directed linear experiences.

It's a bet that Fares is, characteristically, extremely confident in. Early in our conversation, he makes a statement that is impressively bold: "That's another thing that I can guarantee you with It Takes Two: It's impossible, and quote me on this, to get tired of this game. You can put this as the headline. I can literally give 1,000 bucks to anyone who says, 'Oh, I'm tired of this game now because it doesn't surprise me.' One thousand bucks! I guarantee. I'll give it to everyone who gets tired. But they have to be honest about it."

Fares' bombastic confidence is equal parts refreshing and entertaining. But it's clearly coming from a sincere place. In an industry where focus testing can often shave the edges off a creative enterprise until it's an inoffensive sphere, Hazelight is aiming to hold firm in its ideas and tell the stories it wants to tell – whether about prison breaks or romantic breakups.

"We do the game we want to do, and then when we take [the] game [to] players to test it, we want them to like the game we're doing, not adjust the game for what they want," Fares says. "It's different. I think that's very important instead of adjusting the game for the player. They should understand our game, and not the opposite. I guarantee people will love this. For sure. I have no doubt at all. If people don't like this game, then I don't know what to do. It would be nuts. I wouldn't accept it. It's unacceptable! Then everybody is wrong!" He punctuates the last sentence with an infectious laugh.

It's hard not to get swept up into Fares' worldview. He's charismatic and charming, able to say provocative things without sounding like a complete jackass. In an industry where so many developers seemingly aspire to be film directors, Fares comes to games from the other direction. After spending a decade making feature films in Sweden, he's turned his creative energy toward the medium he loves. Fares says It Takes Two was inspired by a lifetime of peering at games from the outside.

"It's almost like a love letter for my love of gaming – especially Nintendo; I'm a big Nintendo fan," he says. "But it's time for Nintendo to get some competition." With that, he cracks himself up completely, looking around for a few seconds, perhaps momentarily taken by surprise by his own good-natured hubris. ***– Jeff Cork***

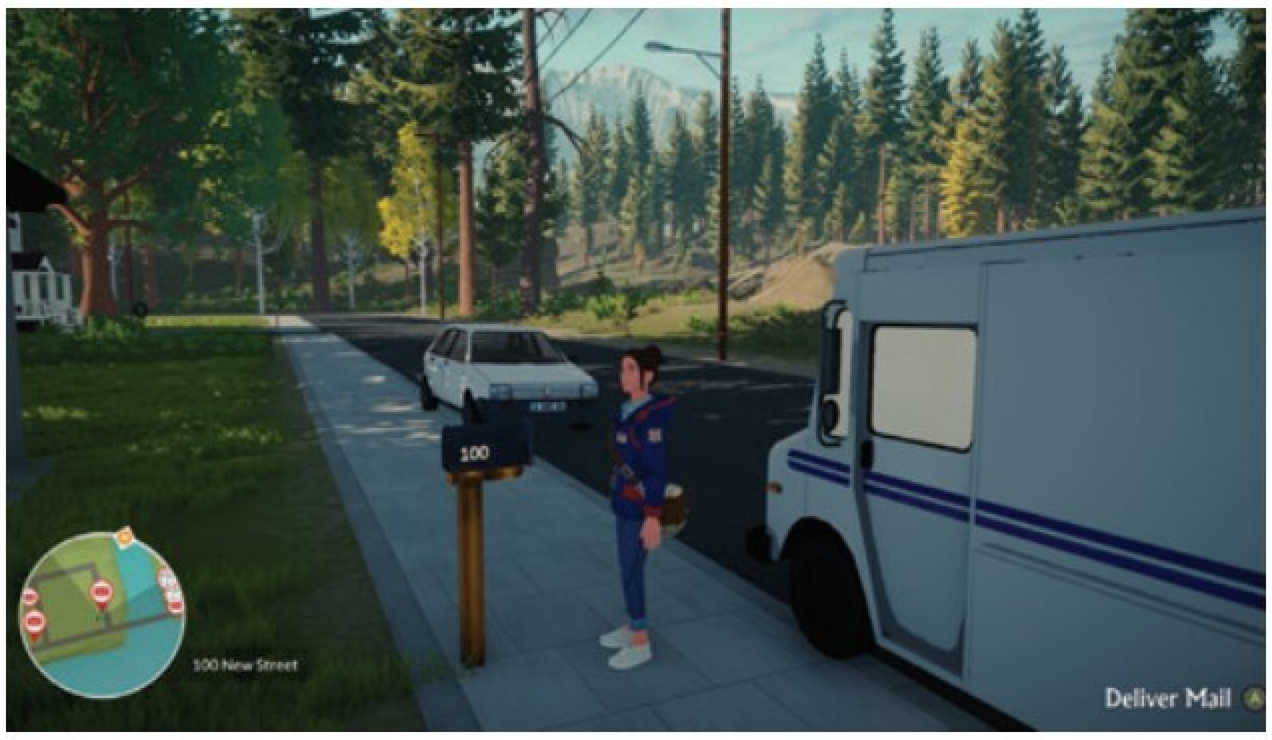
HACKING PROGRESS...

Lake

Going back home again

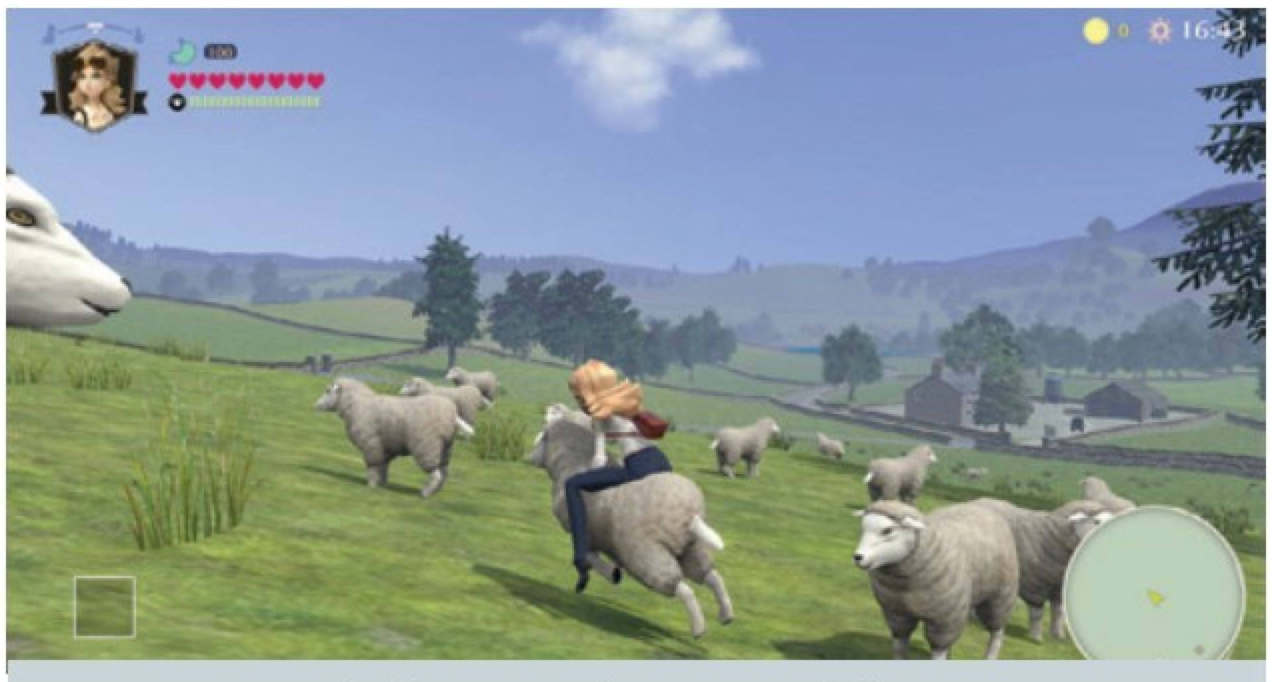
Platform PC, Consoles TBA **Style** 1-Player Adventure
Publisher Whitehorn Games **Developer** Gamious **Release** 2021

The exceedingly charming Lake follows a young woman as she takes a break from her career in the big city to return to her idyllic lakeside hometown, taking a job as a postal carrier. Over a couple of short weeks, intimate conversations and quiet moments of contemplation are interspersed among the simple task of making sure the mail arrives safely each day. It's the sort of introspective and thoughtful game, with branching story threads, that sounds especially appealing after a tumultuous year of near-constant chaos. ***– Matt Miller***



The Good Life

Animal instincts

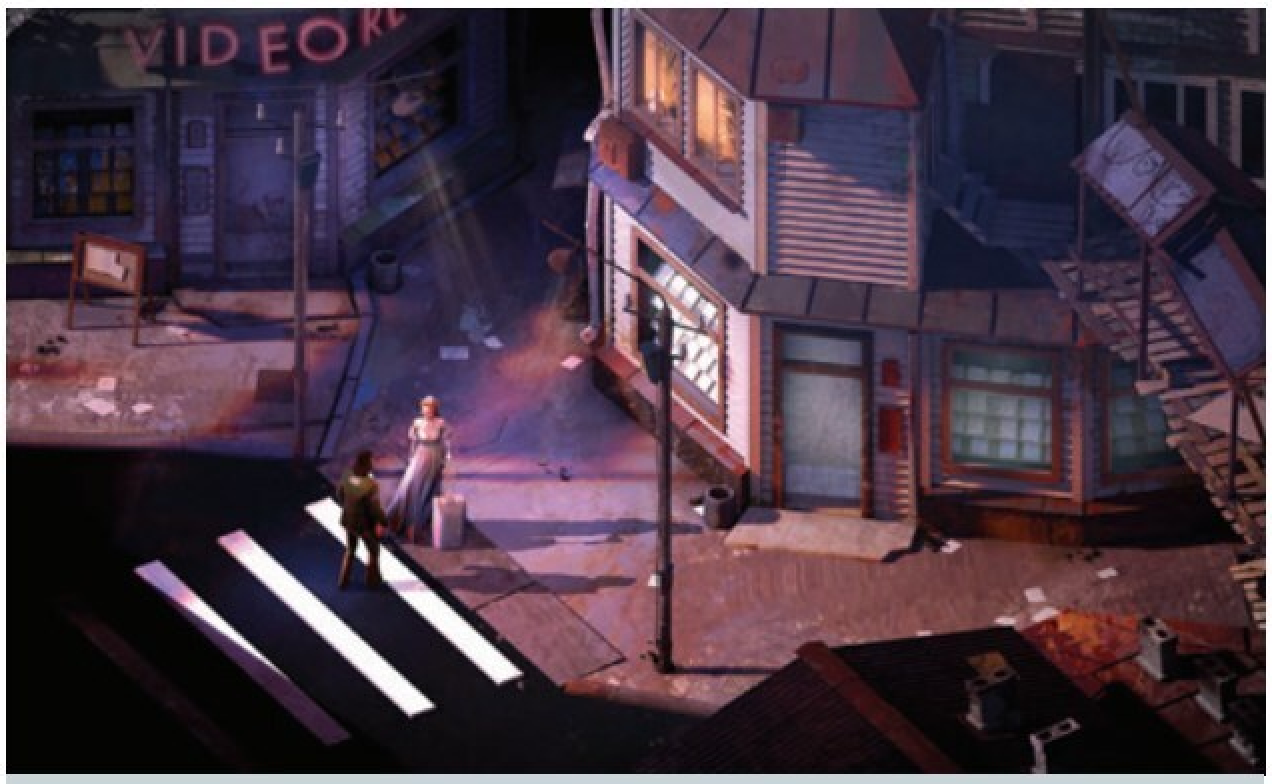


Platform PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC
Style 1-Player Simulation **Publisher** The Irregular Corporation
Developer White Owls **Release** Summer

Hidetaka "Swery" Suehiro is a developer known for his quirky-yet-endearing projects, including Deadly Premonition and The Missing. The next game from Swery and his team at White Owls is The Good Life, and it looks like another surreal adventure. Players control Naomi, a big-city photographer who travels to a quaint English village called Rainy Woods. This peaceful life sim lets players talk to locals, explore the countryside, and even ride sheep. In addition to all that, you also need to get to the bottom of Rainy Woods' big secret: Naomi and the residents are able to transform into cats and dogs. ***– Joe Juba***

Disco Elysium: The Final Cut

More voices in your head



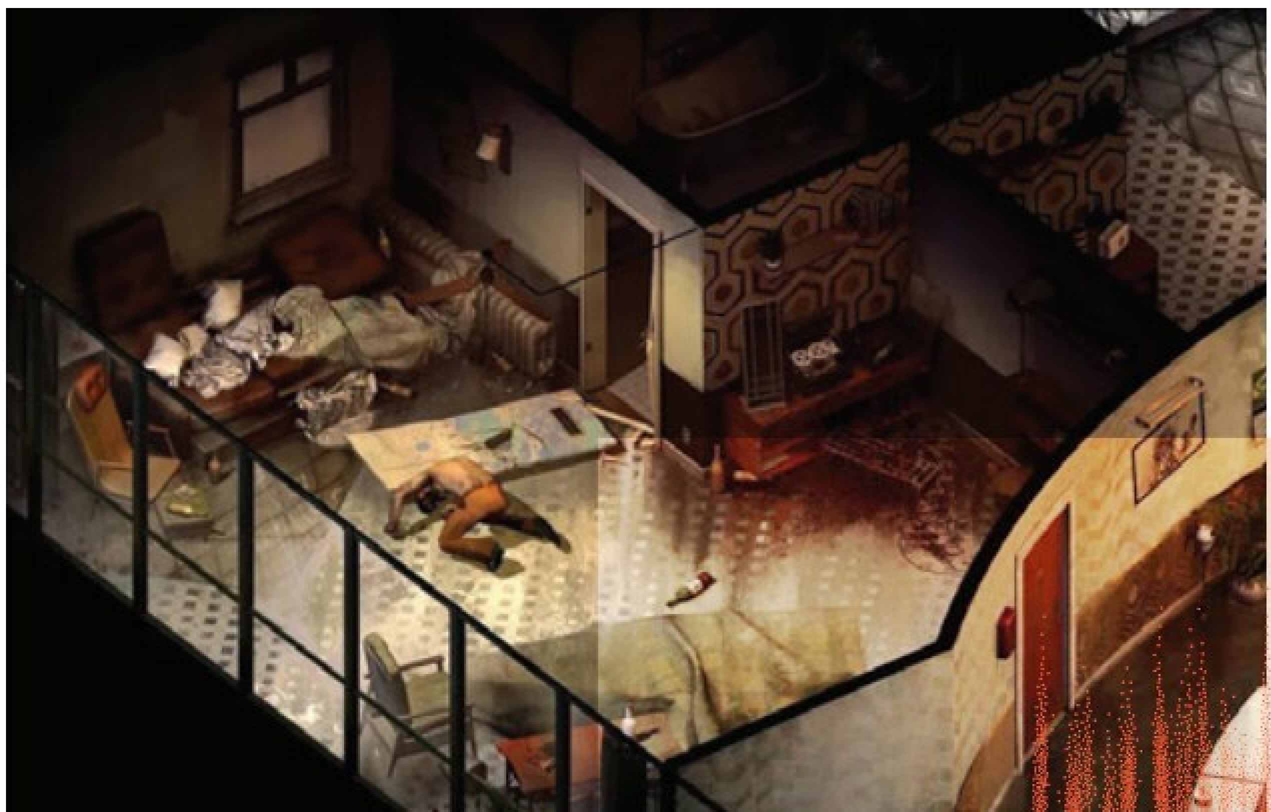
Platform PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, Stadia, PC
Style 1-Player Role-playing **Publisher** ZA/UM **Developer** ZA/UM
Release March (PS5, PS4, Stadia, PC),
Summer (Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, Switch)

When a year-old game is slated to release on additional platforms, it normally doesn't become one of the most anticipated games on the horizon. Disco Elysium is an exception. Developer ZA/UM's unique RPG was among the most inventive and acclaimed games of 2019, but it was only available on PC; this left many console owners with no way to experience the lauded title. Despite announced plans for a console release, most of 2020 went by without any concrete details about Disco Elysium's move to additional platforms. Then, at The Game Awards in December, ZA/UM finally made its plan clear.

The Final Cut is the eagerly awaited console incarnation of Disco Elysium, but it's also more than that. At a basic level, players on all major platforms will be able to see everything this game offers, including its twisting murder mystery, disastrous "hero," fascinating skill system, and intricate world. But The Final Cut also features new additions that expand and enhance the game beyond supporting new consoles and controllers.

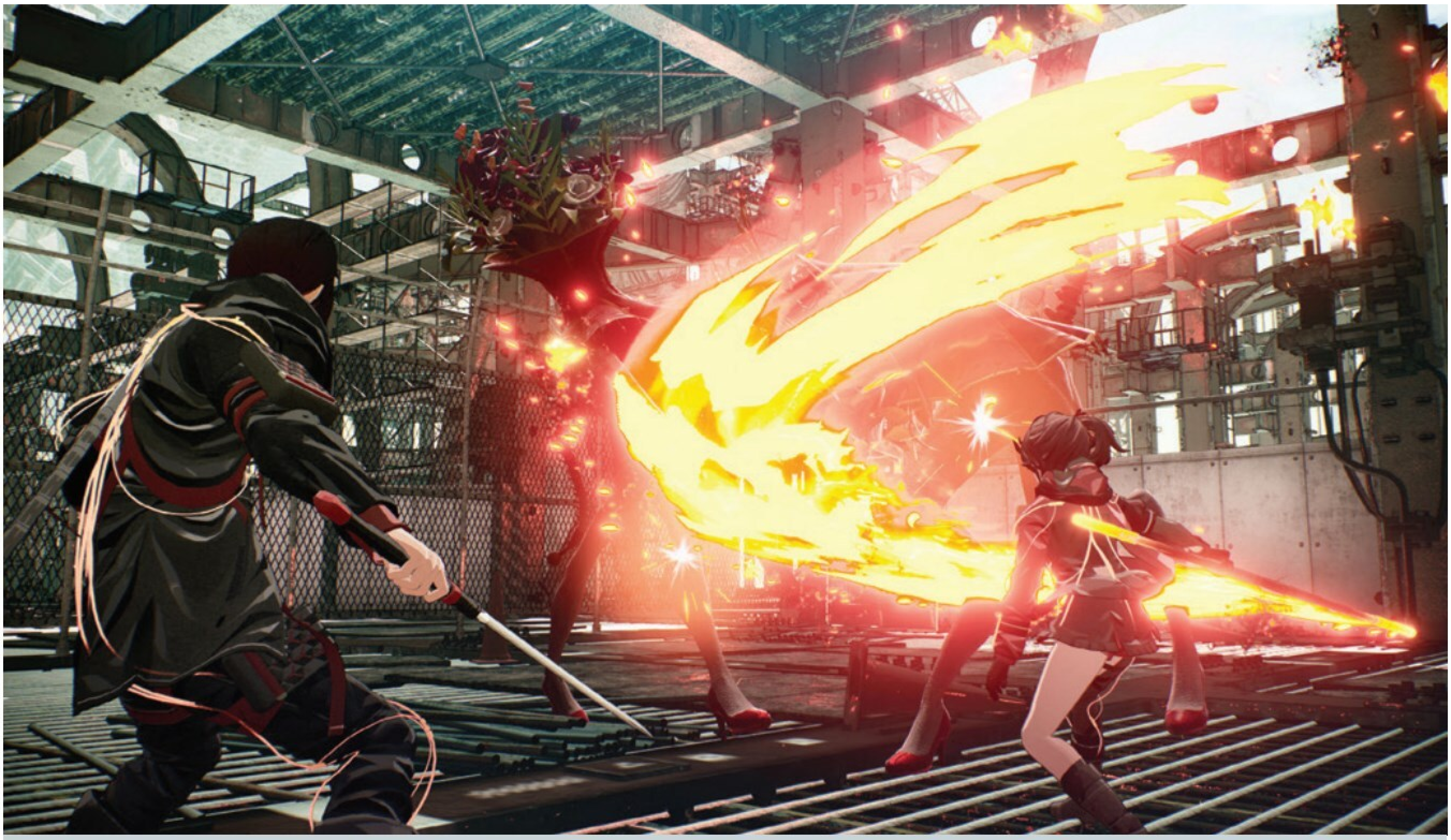
New locations, people, and dialogue give returning players something fresh – including fully voiced characters and over 150,000 added words to the script. You can also find new political vision quests that ZA/UM says allow players to "leave a bigger mark" on the world than before.

All of this new content will be available as a free upgrade for existing owners of the original game when Disco Elysium: The Final Cut goes on sale in March for PS5, PS4, Stadia, and PC. However, players on Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, and Switch have a few extra months until its summer release on those systems. Whether your wait is longer or shorter, the important thing is that a whole new audience is about to discover the bizarre joy of Disco Elysium. ***– Joe Juba***



Scarlet Nexus

Tapping into the mind's potential



Platform PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC **Style** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing
Publisher Bandai Namco **Developer** Bandai Namco **Release** Summer

Bandai Namco turned heads when it unveiled Scarlet Nexus, a futuristic action/RPG created by many of the minds behind Tales of Vesperia. This was the opportunity for the team to do something more sci-fi, and it didn't hold back, creating a bizarre world where brain-eating mutants are falling from the sky and elite psionics must protect Japan with their over-the-top powers. While the impressive visuals and stylish combat caught my attention, I'm most excited that Bandai Namco didn't just go for spectacle, as the team has continually emphasized that this is a story-centric experience focused on the characters and how they grow together along the way.

Scarlet Nexus takes place in the fictional city of New Himuka during an imagined future where a psionic hormone was discovered that grants humans extra-sensory powers. Humans can now control technological devices with their minds – no inputs or voice commands required. However, some are more gifted in these brain powers than others, and these individuals have been recruited into the Other Suppression Force. The OSF fights to contain the new threat called The Others, which are a horrifying meld of living creatures and inanimate objects.

Protagonist Yuito Sumeragi has just recently joined the elite organization and is still striving to prove his worth and master his advanced powers. Yuito's main power is psychokinesis, allowing him to lift, break, and hurl objects at enemies. He also can get up close and personal with his sword attacks, allowing him to alternate between these two approaches to get the best of foes. This is essential, as you can't just spam his psychokinesis abilities; a meter must be recharged with regular attacks. Yuito will also team up with other OSF agents, who all have all their own unique powers such as pyrokinetics and self-duplication to add interesting wrinkles to the fight.

A lot about Scarlet Nexus still remains mysterious. The Game Awards trailer teased Yuito having to team up and "become as one" with a mysterious scout named Kasune. Kasune has been teased in previous footage, but this time she was seen as playable, hinting at you alternating between the two – although the trailer did emphasize it would be "one story."

Scarlet Nexus' strange and frightening world pulls you in, and part of the excitement is being able to explore this futuristic version of Japan while confronting The Others firsthand in adrenaline-pumping battles. That said, I'm most curious about where this story will go and the interesting personalities I'll meet along the way. Bandai Namco touts this as a "brainpunk" future. I'll be curious to see exactly what that entails and what more-advanced RPG elements await.
– Kimberley Wallace

Resident Evil Village

It takes a village

Platform PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC **Style** 1-Player Action **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** May 7

Capcom hasn't let Resident Evil fans catch their breath; the publisher is set to release its third game in three years in the long-running horror series. Fortunately, Capcom's recent track record is incredibly solid, so we're not complaining. After revisiting several classic zombie encounters with the remakes of Resident Evil 2 and 3, Capcom is finally ready to look toward the series' future with Resident Evil Village.

Village's release might be this year, but we know surprisingly little about this upcoming monster romp, other than the fact that it continues the narrative established in Resident Evil 7: Biohazard. During the events of that game, Ethan Winters traveled to a derelict plantation in Louisiana looking for his lost wife, Mia. After battling his way through a series of demented locals and a horde of sludge-like monsters, Ethan saved his wife and cured her of a deadly mutation.

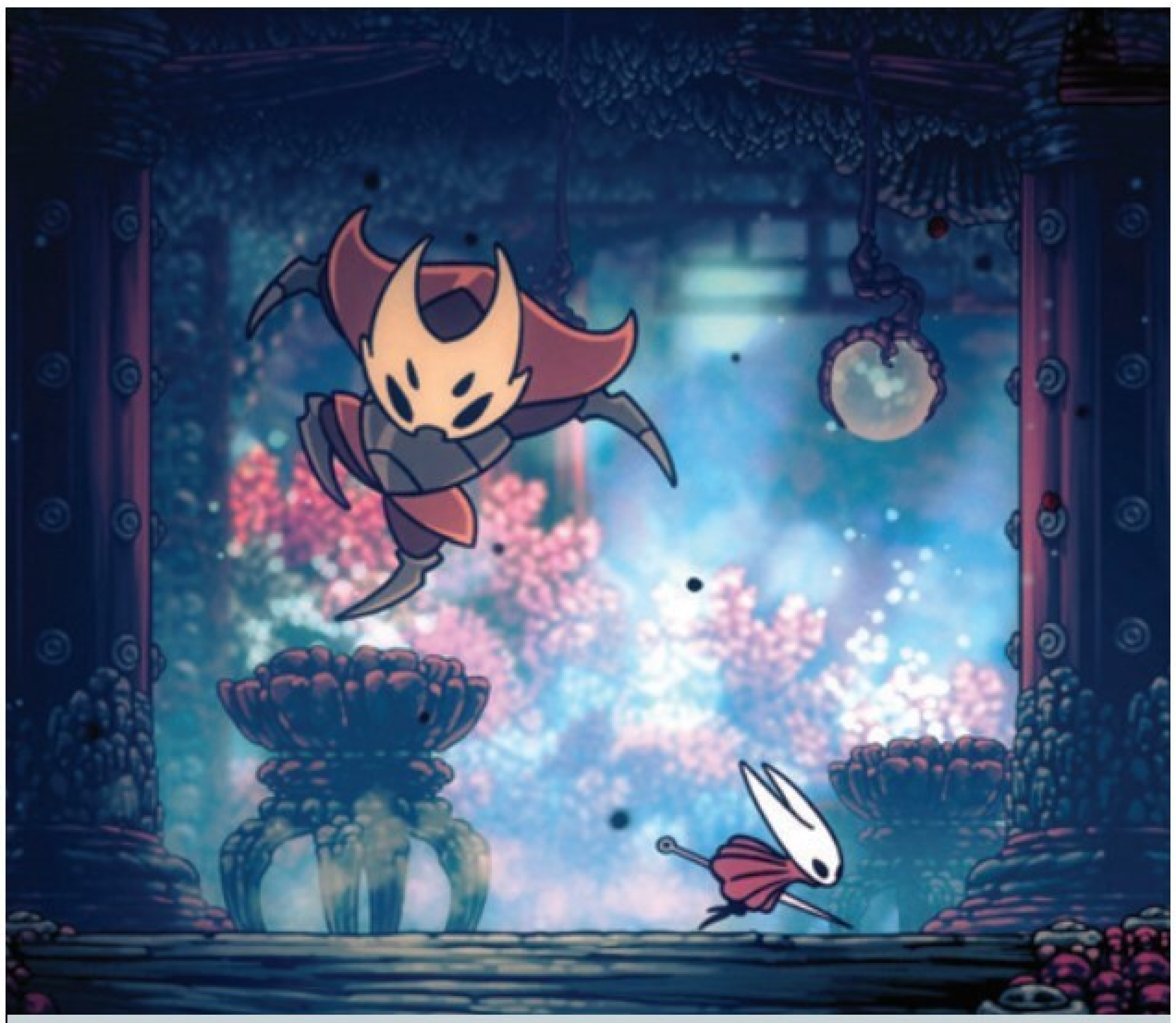
However, the trailers for Resident Evil Village reveal that the events of RE7 will have long-lasting reverberations. This new nightmare begins as Ethan and Mia move into a small European village, looking to settle down and enjoy some peace and comfort. Unfortunately, just as the couple is beginning to build a new life, tragedy strikes yet again. One night, Resident Evil mainstay Chris Redfield arrives and murders Mia in cold blood. While this is certainly shocking, we have to wonder if these events are what they seem. Chris Redfield is one of the series' biggest heroes, and he currently works as a specialist for the counter-bioterror organization BSAA. Consequently, we wonder if Mia is still infected with a deadly virus, or if she's not even who she claims to be.

Like RE7, Village is a first-person survival-horror experience full of puzzles and tense combat encounters. As you explore this snow-capped village, you slowly amass an arsenal of new weapons and gear to help you overcome each new challenge and get to the bottom of the mystery surrounding the BSAA. Capcom was especially inspired by the rise of modern folk-horror as seen in films like *Midsommar*, and we've had glimpses of ax-wielding werewolves, withered crones, and other shadowy figures swarming with bugs. Ethan's journey won't be for the faint of heart.

The two Resident Evil Village trailers to date are composed of less than six minutes of total gameplay, but that's enough to whet our appetite. Thankfully, we shouldn't have to wait long for the full meal. Resident Evil has never looked scarier, so steel yourself. ***– Ben Reeves***

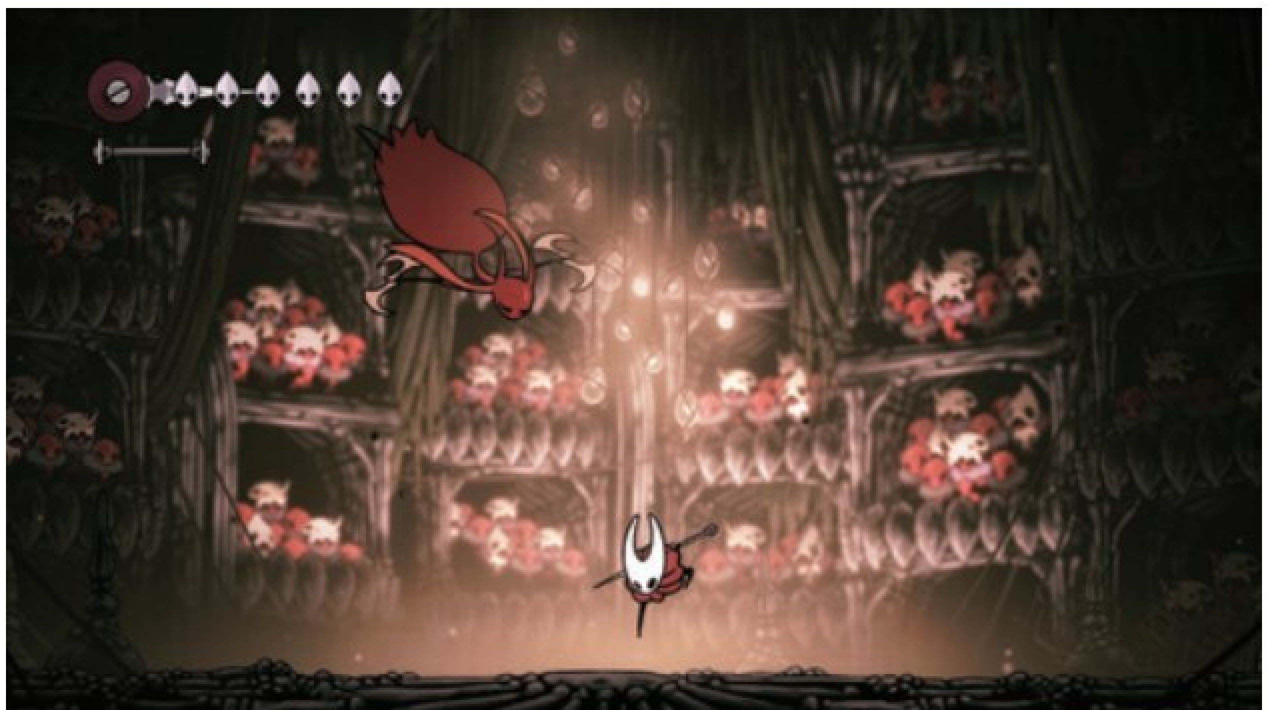
Hollow Knight: Silksong

Moving the needle



Platform Switch, PC **Style** 1-Player Platforming
Publisher Team Cherry **Developer** Team Cherry **Release** TBA

Hollow Knight is one the best action-platformers in years, which is why we're so excited to finally get our hands on Hollow Knight: Silksong. What began as an expansion is now a full-on sequel starring Hornet, the coolest character (and recurring rival) from the first game. Hornet finds herself captured and taken to a mysterious new land where she must ascend to the peak of a dangerous kingdom. The princess protector sports her own unique abilities and brings a more graceful, faster-paced tempo to the already fine-tuned combat system. Over 150 brand-new enemies line up to be felled by Hornet's needle, including a suite of sure-to-be challenging bosses. Thankfully, new towns mean a fresh cast of allies to lend helping hands along the way. Fans have clamored for Hollow Knight: Silksong, so hopefully it finally arrives this year. ***– Marcus Stewart***



Diablo IV

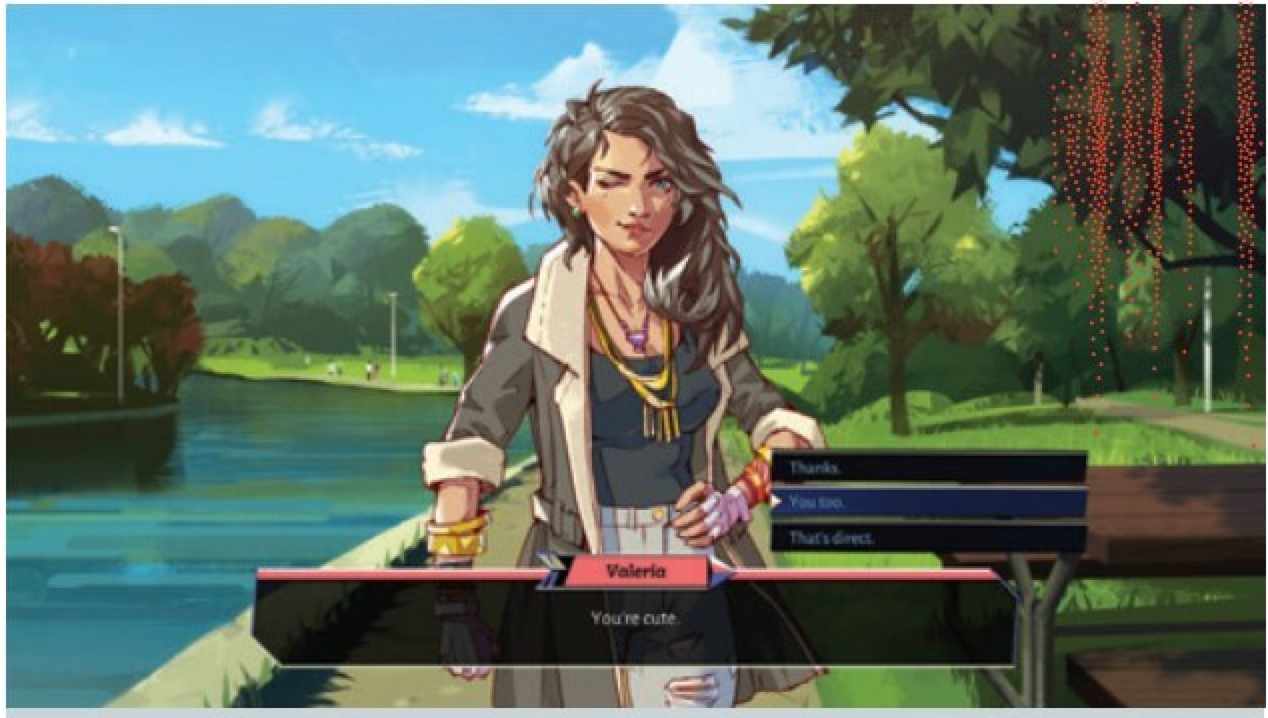
Raising hell

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC
Style 1-Player Action (Online TBA) **Publisher** Blizzard Entertainment **Developer** Blizzard Entertainment **Release** TBA

Will Diablo IV hit in 2021? Probably not. But in the world of alphas, betas, and all manner of early access offerings to get things perfect before a release, some form of playable game on the horizon isn't impossible. Diablo IV takes place after Diablo III and is going for a Diablo II aesthetic in terms of gothic horror, while maintaining the heavy loot focus and customization options that have defined the series since the franchise began. It's almost understating things to say that Diablo IV is heavily anticipated, as it may be one of the most anticipated games on this list. We're hoping it can get things perfect as it offers an open-world experience with big bosses for players to take on together when it arrives. ***– Daniel Tack***

Boyfriend Dungeon

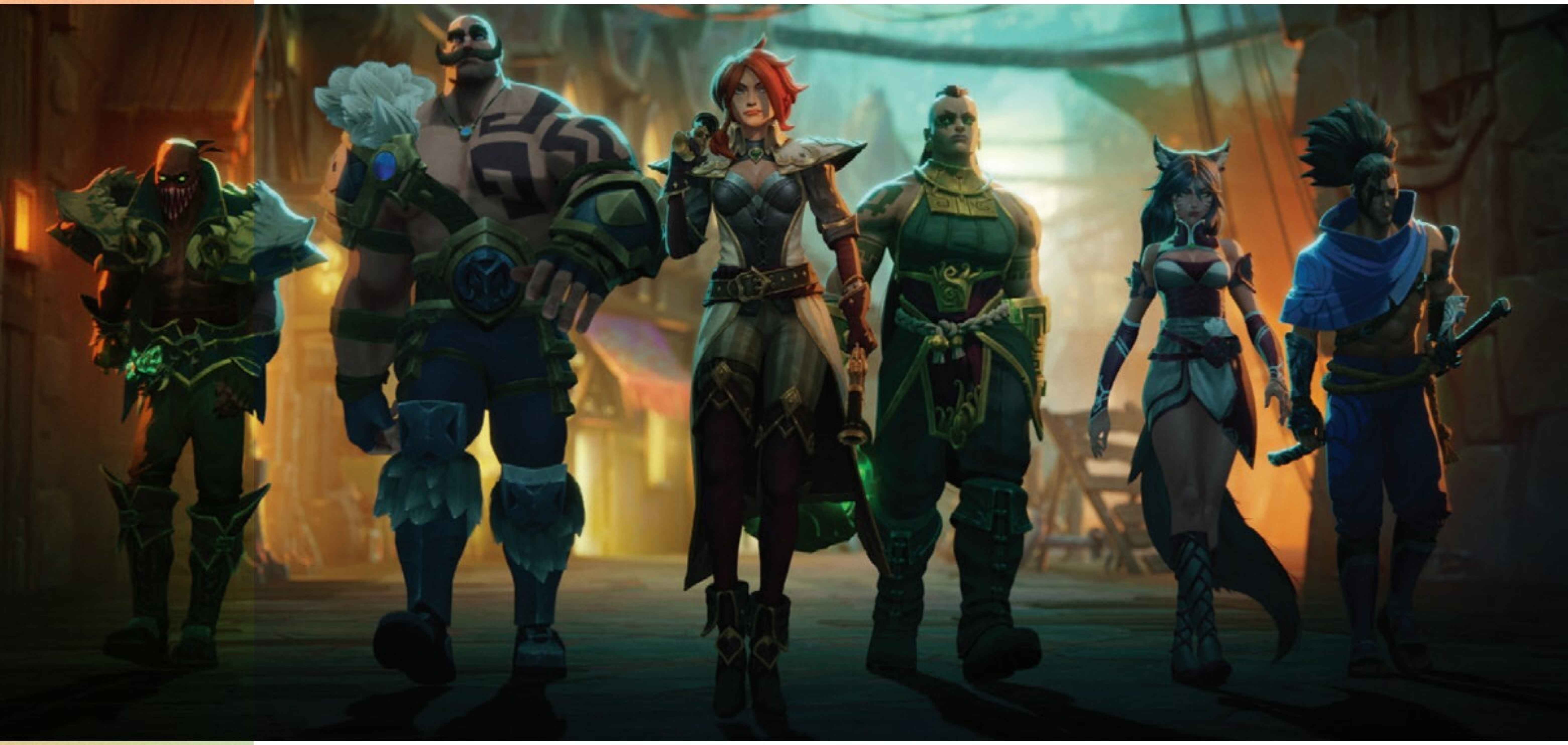
Finding the perfect weapon



Platform Switch, PC **Style** 1-Player Action/Adventure
Publisher Kitfox Games **Developer** Kitfox Games **Release** 2021

Dungeon crawlers are a dime a dozen these days, but what about one that lets you date your weapons? Boyfriend Dungeon brings a whole new meaning to leveling up these important battle assets in this "shack-and-slash" adventure.

In it, your summer job of clearing out creatures from what is called the "dunj" leaves you with an awesome discovery: The weapons you find transform into breathtaking and dateable mates. Get to know the nine potential suitors, from dancing swords to heart-piercing daggers, by taking them to places like the beach or club. It's silly fun, which more of us could use in our lives. ***– Kimberley Wallace***



Ruined King: A League Of Legends Story

Fortune favors the mold

Platform PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC **Style** 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Riot Forge **Developer** Airship Syndicate **Release** 2021

Airship Syndicate is best known for the stylish Battle Chasers: Nightwar and Darksiders Genesis, but now it's working with Riot Forge to create a new turn-based RPG in the League of Legends universe. Based on a recent trailer, the game looks a lot like Battle Chasers: Nightwar in terms of gameplay and features, but the source material is pure League of Legends. If you haven't played the free-to-play MOBA sensation, it features a motley cast of colorful characters, some of which form the crew that players command in Ruined King.

Six different League characters are available to add to your party. While the game takes place in the Bilgewater, with its big pirate energy and the cursed Shadow Isles cloaked in Black Mist, the cast is a healthy basket of different champions. Miss Fortune and Pyke are there to represent the pirate bunch, but Yasuo and Ahri (a literal nine-tailed-fox woman) add a flavorful punch to the mix. You can also play as popular champions Braum, the quintessential giant dude with a huge shield and goodhearted nature, or Illaoi, the Kraken Priestess. As you can imagine, all these characters come with unique abilities and attacks that suit their League personas while translating into turn-based RPG combat.

Joe Madureira's comic-book artistry translated well for those who enjoy traditional JRPG formats with a bit of modern flair in Battle Chasers: Nightwar, incorporating concepts of dungeon running, a hefty focus on crafting, and improving a varied cast over the course of a game with interesting encounters and smart synergistic gameplay. Based on trailer footage, it looks like a bounty system featuring wanted individuals will let you participate in optional side-quest content for a bevvy of rewards. This will likely involve tracking down mini-bosses in small dungeons. Similar to concepts that were tinkered with in Battle Chasers, it looks like some of the environments will include various puzzles to solve and traps to avoid. Characters have special abilities that they can use when out of combat as you explore the levels, like Yasuo tapping into the wind to skate safely past dangerous floor obstacles.

In addition to tracking down bounties and side-quests, when you're not heading down the critical path you can do battle in an arena to test your skills against tougher and tougher combatants for progressively more powerful rewards or go fishing.

If all of this sounds a lot like the systems of Battle Chasers: Nightwar layered into the League of Legends world, that's precisely what Ruined King: A League of Legends Story looks like right now. That's not a bad thing at all, as stylish art and modern iteration on old-school RPG systems is a winning combo, and bringing the League of Legends universe into anything is an interesting proposition we're sure to see more of in coming years as Riot Forge gives developers a chance to use Riot's flagship IP. ***– Daniel Tack***

Shin Megami Tensei V

Talking with Tengu

Platform Switch **Style** 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Atlus
Developer Atlus **Release** 2021

After years of waiting with barely anything to go on, Atlus finally revealed Shin Megami Tensei V was coming to Switch in 2021 with a brief trailer. Shin Megami Tensei V is being developed with Unreal 4, which is a first, so it will be interesting to see how that pans out when we finally get to see some gameplay footage.

For those not familiar with the Shin Megami Tensei series, it is the precursor and parent to the spin-off series Persona, which is now an order of magnitude more popular thanks to big releases like Persona 5. Shin Megami Tensei games can be likened to a dark, hardcore Pokémon experience, where you capture demons and combine them to create incredibly powerful beings to lay waste to your enemies in a traditional JRPG format. This often means plenty of grinding and exploration as you wander the worlds attempting to coerce, cajole, or charm demons into joining your party.

One of the facets of the Shin Megami Tensei games is talking with and persuading enemy demons to join you via dialogue prompts and gifts. This unusual system is one aspect I'm wondering if Atlus will bring back for this title, as this is a big Switch release that could bring a lot of attention to the series that typically has a more niche contingent of die-hard fans (I'm one of them). Typically, a Shin Megami Tensei title is anything but comfort food – the difficulty is tuned on the high end, melding demons can become a complex affair, and you're often squaring off against incredibly powerful gods that can decimate your party in a heartbeat. You might think to yourself, "Oh, this is a story fight I'm supposed to lose" as your team is annihilated but no, you are supposed to craft a crew to take down deity after deity. If you've been sleeping on this series, it's pretty awesome. I can't wait to sweet-talk some demons in 2021. ***– Daniel Tack***

Magic: Legends

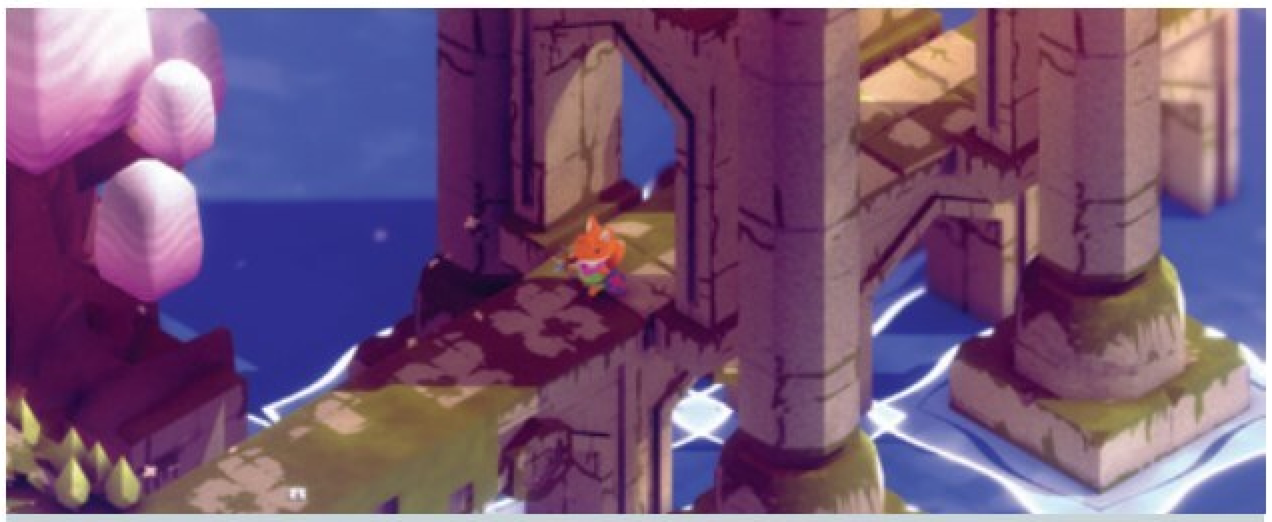
Stacking the deck

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC
Style Online Multiplayer Action/Role-Playing
Publisher Perfect World **Developer** Cryptic Studios **Release** TBA

Magic: Legends brings the deckbuilding of Magic: The Gathering and lets players summon big monsters, cast huge spells, and explore vast worlds in an action-RPG setting. While based on the popular trading-card game, the gameplay is fast and furious as you cycle through your deck and gather gobs of loot and customization options. Take on evolving challenges as the game ramps up along with your progression with an A.I. designed to keep you on your toes with big risks and bigger rewards. We're hoping to see a lot more from Magic: Legends soon as it moves out of a private alpha phase. ***– Daniel Tack***

Tunic

A cute fox in a ruined world



Platform Xbox One, PC **Style** 1-Player Action **Publisher** Finji
Developer Andrew Shouldice **Release** TBA

A cute and charming indie action game that draws heavy inspiration from the Legend of Zelda franchise, Tunic is a game that's been on our radars for years. In the time since Tunic's reveal during E3 2017, creator Andrew Shouldice has been studying other games such as Monument Valley, Bloodborne, Fez, and more while trying to get things just right.

One thing Shouldice has been focusing on over the past couple of years has been finding a strong balance between puzzles, exploration, and combat. The creator wants to deliver a title with very little guidance for where the player should go, so he draws the biggest comparison between Tunic and Zelda, specifically the first title in the beloved Nintendo franchise.

Unfortunately, as recently as last month, we still don't have a release date for Tunic, but with so many awesome games influencing it, we're hopeful for the long-awaited outcome. ***– Brian Shea***

Persona 5 Strikers

The return of the Phantom Thieves

Platform PS4, Switch, PC **Style** 1-Player Action **Publisher** Atlus **Developer** Atlus, Omega Force **Release** February 23

When Persona 5 was released in 2017, it delivered the ultimate combination of style and substance, causing it to be considered by many as one of the premier modern role-playing games. Last year, Persona 5 Royal expanded on the adventure through new content and areas to explore, but in 2021, the Phantom Thieves are returning for an all-new adventure.

For Strikers, the Persona team at Atlus collaborated with Omega Force, the studio behind the Dynasty Warriors franchise, to deliver an action-packed title starring everyone's favorite group of high-school heart stealers. Similar to how the studio told distinct stories within the Legend of Zelda universe with the Hyrule Warriors games, Omega Force is using Persona 5 Strikers to expand the world of the Phantom Thieves.

The story picks up six months after the conclusion of Persona 5, as Joker, Ann, Ryuji, Morgana, and the rest of the Phantom Thieves set out on a road trip across Japan. That means this time the action expands beyond Tokyo; players can expect to visit six different cities, all featuring regional recipes you can cook before jumping into action against the Shadows. Diving back into the Persona 5 universe and re-joining the cast of characters for yet another journey is an exciting proposition, as players head back into the Metaverse to explore dungeons in a campaign Atlus says can be enjoyed by longtime fans and series newcomers alike.

438/254
Shibuya Jail
Central Street

Because Strikers is co-developed by Atlus and Omega Force, the combat system is a hybrid of the turn-based system from the Persona series and the hack-and-slash mechanics from the Dynasty Warriors franchise. Most of the gameplay uses high-amplitude action similar to the Warriors games, but you can use pause-and-plan sequences inspired by the mainline Persona series to methodically strategize your next moves. You can also gain the upper hand on enemies by ambushing them, exploiting their elemental weaknesses to deal damage, and finishing them off with an All-Out Attack.

Each of the Phantom Thieves from the original is playable, allowing you to harness their specific skills and individual Personas for combat that effectively uses the source material in new ways. You can strengthen each character's skills and abilities to work better within your preferred playstyle and find the flashiest, most effective ways to clear out hordes of enemies.

Of course, it wouldn't be a new Persona release without an awesome soundtrack. While you can expect songs from the original Persona 5, as well as some high-energy re-records of fan-favorite tracks like "Last Surprise" and "Rivers in the Desert," Persona 5 Strikers adds a host of new tracks that fit right in with the rest of the music from the soundtrack.

Persona 5 Strikers has been out in Japan for a year now, but Western audiences will finally have the chance to join the gang once again to save the world from the evil and corrupt. While we're certainly not complaining about another adventure starring this cast, hopefully the team can get some rest and just enjoy high-school life after this.

– Brian Shea

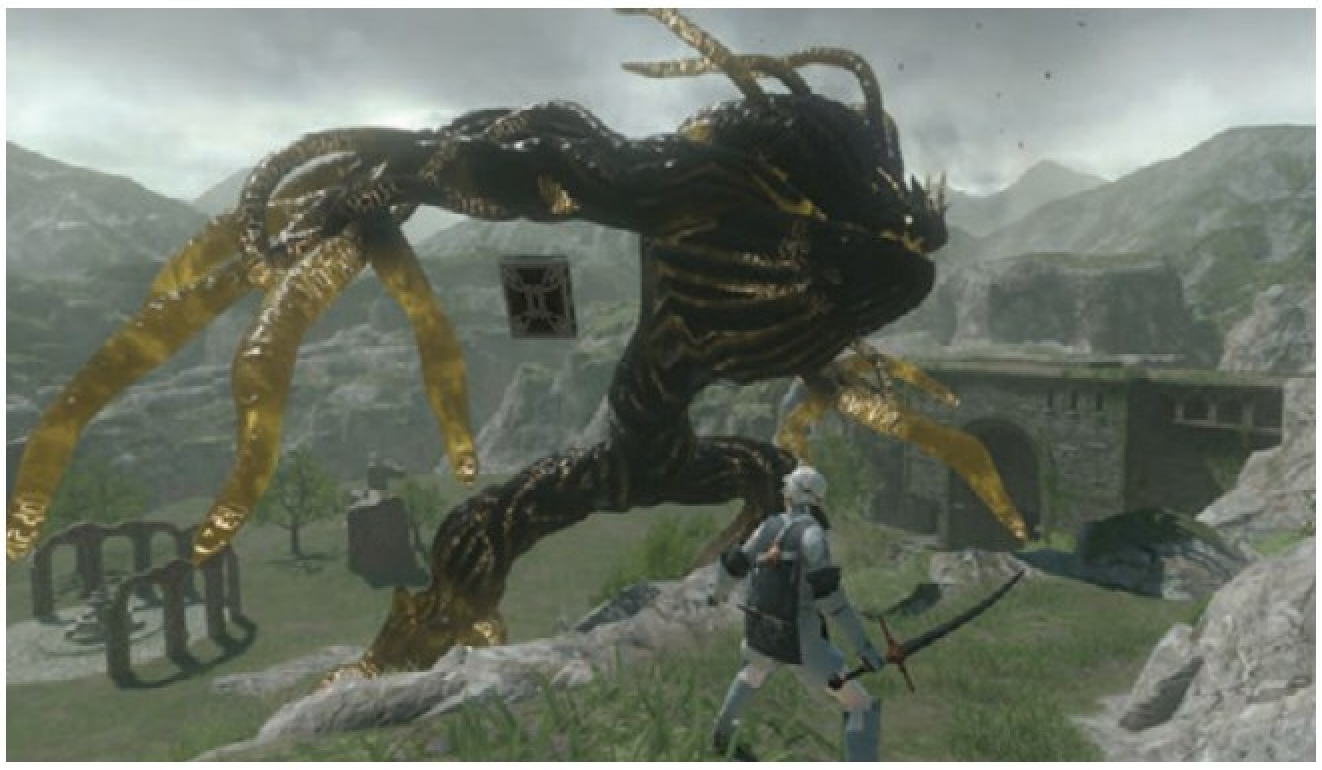
Nier Replicant

Love, death, and robots

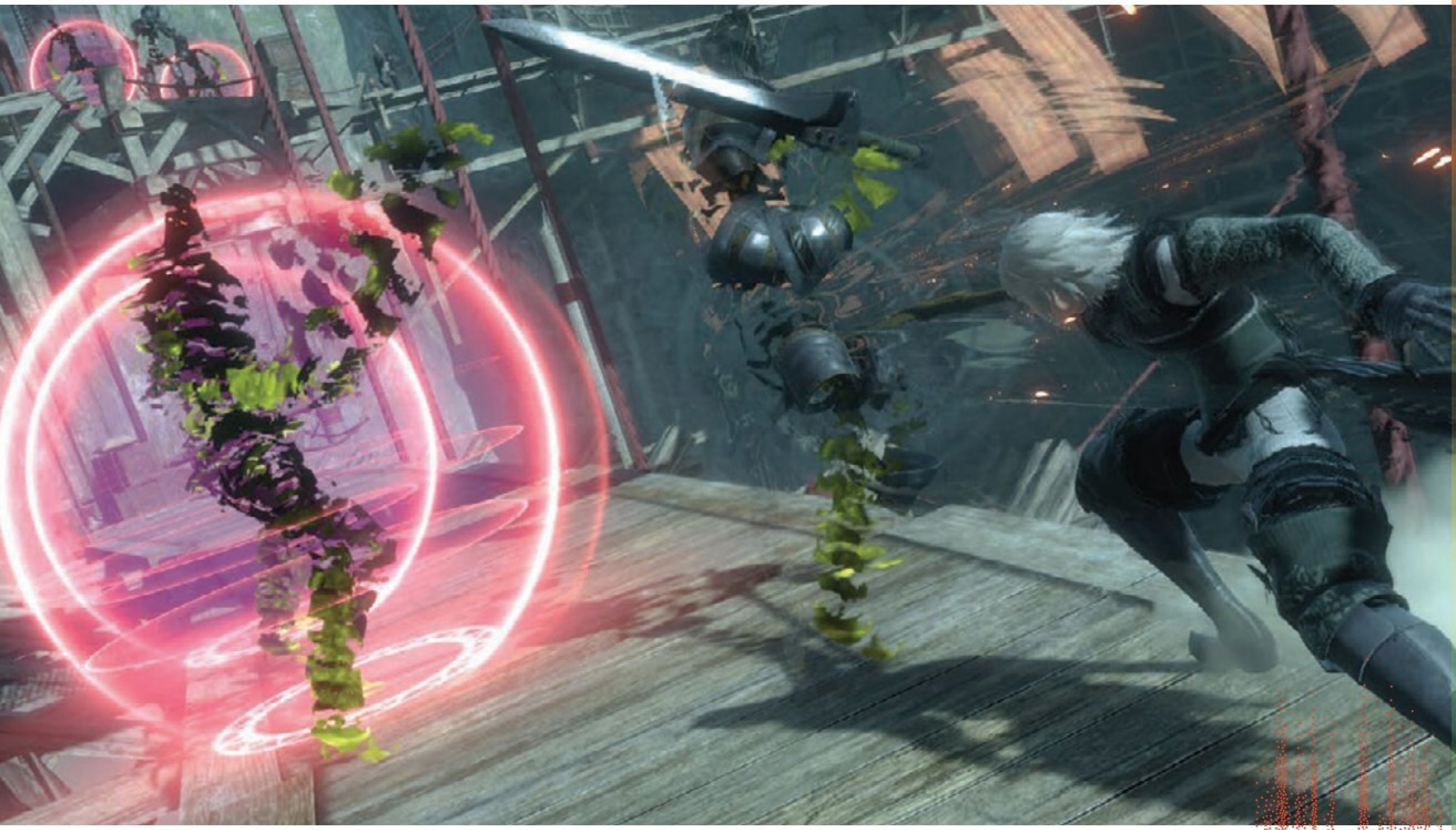
Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Style** Action **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Toylogic **Release** April 23

Thousands of years before 2B and 9S patrolled Nier: Automata's war-torn metropolises, a desperate warrior cleaved a path through hordes of monsters in search of his long-lost, gravely ill sister. In Nier Replicant – a remaster and remake of the original game that was only released in Japan as well as a prequel to Automata – the windswept pastures and forsaken ruins of Earth are haunted by unsettling entities called Shades. When his younger sister is abducted by the mysterious Shadowlord, the titular protagonist, Nier, must leave the safety and familiarity of his home to scour Replicant's various environments alongside two loyal companions – the human-Shade hybrid Kainé and Emil, a young, kind-hearted boy. Along the way, players will learn more about their allies and the world through a collection of side quests inspired by the original game.

During engagements, the flashy, acrobatic combat of Automata makes a welcome return. As a skilled fighter with an aptitude for all manner of weapons, Nier can impale Shades with one-handed blades, rip apart several enemies at a time with hulking greatswords, or conjure magical attacks with his levitating grimoire. The fast-paced flow of battle makes vanquishing adversaries with mid-air combos and AoE attacks satisfying for returning veterans as well as players new to the Nier franchise. Shades, the primary antagonistic faction (players also run into wild animals and autonomous robots from time to time) come in many shapes and sizes – from humanoid, armor-wearing soldiers to towering goliaths blanketed in darkness. Like in Automata, boss fights push player reflexes the game's mechanics to their limits as waves of laser beams and fiery explosions fill the screen. Keiichi Okabe, the composer of the previous Nier installments, lends his skills to Replicant's thrilling soundtrack. Relentless chants, vibrating synths, and quiet violin medleys serve as the perfect sonic backdrop to large-scale battles and breathtaking landscapes.



Even though there's no word on whether or not Nier Replicant will launch on the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S, the upgraded graphics bring the game's most stunning visual features to life: blood splatters against the grassy knolls of the Northern Plains with each swing and multicolored sparks flash as swords collide with one another. The main cast of characters has also been redesigned for newer audiences. Moreover, Replicant's narrative structure looks to mirror its predecessor's, meaning that players will be required to complete the central story multiple times in order to experience a bevy of diverging finales. And if the original Nier and Nier: Automata were any indication, Replicant's ending sequences will likely force players to make drastic choices that force them to evaluate their own beliefs while adding substantial stakes to the ways in which the plot unfolds. ***– Jason Guisao***



reviews

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 333

77 Hitman 3

Hitman 3 marks the end of an era both for Agent 47 as well as IO Interactive. The studio's bold experiment to deliver a deeply connected trilogy paid off, concluding with some of the series' best level design and immersive storytelling. All the while, it continues to reward player improvisation, patience, and experimentation.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	The number of chances you have left. Don't blow this!

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings

Hitman 3

A killer conclusion

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 333

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** IO Interactive **Developer** IO Interactive **Release** January 20 **Rating** M

Agent 47 has been an arbiter of death for decades now, using his finely honed skillset in a variety of dirty business around the world. With Hitman 3, his World of Assassination trilogy comes to its inevitably bloody end. Over these three games, IO Interactive boldly set out to create a seamless Hitman experience that felt consistent, from the tutorial mission to the conclusion. After playing through this stunning finale, I'm relieved that the studio stuck the landing. Every mission in the final arc is a statement, demonstrating a mastery of level design and a darkly playful willingness to subvert expectations laid out five years ago. Hitman 3 is not a good place to begin your Hitman journey, but it's a satisfying way to say goodbye.

Hitman has always been about dropping players in unfamiliar locations, giving them a target, and then letting them run wild. The most recent games have taken that design philosophy to new heights. At its best, Hitman offers an experience like no other, delivering intricately crafted scenarios and giving players the tools they need to tackle missions in different ways. The first time I experienced Hitman 3's bombastic opening mission in Dubai, I methodically explored as much of the Sceptre skyscraper as I could before killing my two targets. Hours later, I was able to efficiently roll through without dawdling, killing both without anyone even knowing I was ever there. It's like visiting a supermarket; sometimes you want to comparison shop, and other times you just want to grab some milk and get out of the store.

Hitman 3 introduces new elements, including a camera gadget, but the most notable are its persistent shortcuts. By unlocking specific doors or accessing ladders, those newly available paths are open to you on subsequent runs. They're a great complement to the series' unlockable starting locations, ultimately giving you the ability to bypass sections of a level and make a beeline for whatever – or whoever – you're most interested in pursuing. I loved meeting a partygoer outside of Berlin's nightclub area and getting a guided tour of the map, but was relieved when I found a side door that let me slip right past him and security. Some shortcuts are in riskier locations, so you have to weigh that additional danger, but I enjoyed having access to more options.

IO Interactive has been crafting these types of missions for years now, and that experience shows. Nearly every mission introduces something that upends what longtime players have come to expect. The end goal of killing your targets is always part of the deal, but Hitman 3 proves that there's still plenty of room for more variety. One mission offers a lengthy (and optional) murder mystery to solve, putting you in the unusual role of private investigator and interrogator. In another, you begin without having any knowledge of your targets' identities. Working without intel, you have to methodically observe and listen to conversations before springing into action. If you're impatient, you can simply go on a rampage and hope for the best. Five of the six levels offer up a wealth of improvisational opportunities; I spent nearly two hours infiltrating a high-tech firm in China, and was captivated by just about every moment. The final mission is more linear than the others, but it's no less satisfying.

Hitman 3 is a worthy conclusion to the trilogy, but if you haven't been impressed with previous entries it's not likely to change your mind. Its improvements, welcome as they may be for longtime fans, are incremental upgrades rather than the larger leaps that you might be accustomed to seeing in more traditional sequels. I enjoy its slow-burn pacing and love the tension that comes from slipping past guards unnoticed. I love looking at each level as its own weird puzzle, and something about poking the simulation to see what is and isn't possible really clicks with me. However, if you think the previous two installments have mediocre gunplay or find them too fussy, those elements haven't changed. You can technically jump into Hitman 3 without playing the previous games, but that is doing yourself a disservice. Much of the game's emotional and narrative weight hinges on you having experienced the trilogy.

Hitman 3 concludes a chapter in the greater Hitman story, but it doesn't feel like an ending. There's an abundance of content and side activities on offer, and the trilogy as a whole is bound to be a long-term destination for would-be assassins. IO Interactive's final act in the trilogy anticipates and rewards player experimentation, features meticulous level design, and has moments of ghoulish catharsis that makes me cackle aloud. My enthusiasm for it all is as indelible as the barcode tattooed on the back of Agent 47's head. » **Jeff Cork**

This review is based solely on the PC version of Hitman 3. At the time of this writing, the review code for the PlayStation version of the game was unavailable, so we're unable to evaluate its performance (or its VR capabilities) on consoles

9

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • Stadia • PC

» **Concept**
Wrap up Agent 47's latest trilogy with a new batch of sandboxes and targets for his grim work

» **Graphics**
Hitman's clean aesthetic makes situations easy to interpret, whether you're in a glistening skyscraper or a sweaty club

» **Sound**
Audio cues provide a great way to keep track of guards and other potential issues, while a minimalist score punctuates the action when necessary

» **Playability**
The trilogy's intentionally seamless nature means that any muscle memory you've developed over past installments carries over into the finale

» **Entertainment**
Agent 47's journey ends on a high note, at least as far as players are concerned. New levels are memorable and cater to the freedom fans have come to expect

» **Replay Value**
High

The Medium

Grave new world

6.75

Xbox Series X/S • PC

» Concept
Marianne is a spiritual medium who can commune with the dead, but when she receives a mysterious call from the past, she has to contend with her personal demons

» Graphics
The backgrounds are well detailed, but the art design is bland, and the simple facial animations don't always match the dialogue

» Sound
Eerie ambient effects amplify the creepy atmosphere, but the generic soundtrack did nothing for me

» Playability
The Medium is fairly straightforward. Most of the puzzles simply require that you run across the environment and find the right item to open the next area

» Entertainment
This is a horror game with more tedium than tension

» Replay Value
Moderately low

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Bloober Team **Developer** Bloober Team **Release** January 28 **Rating** M

With our five senses, we perceive a great deal of the world around us. But what if another world exists behind the one we see? What if a second reality sits just behind the façade of our experiences? And, what if this reality is full of spirits we cannot see and cannot touch, who brush past us on a daily basis? Bloober Team attempts to explore this mysterious spirit realm with its puzzle-filled horror adventure, The Medium. Sadly, the studio's vision for an unseen reality isn't that exciting to look at.

Marianne is a supernatural medium who can talk to the dead, but when she receives a mysterious phone call summoning her to a derelict hotel on the outskirts of Kraków, Poland, her talents are truly tested. When Marianne arrives at the resort, the only inhabitants she encounters are tormented lost souls and an invisible monster who forces Marianne to wrestle with her past. The Medium's narrative starts with a lot of promise, but quickly loses steam. Marianne doesn't have much of a personality, and is little more than a cipher to move the plot along. Moreover, certain details are hard to follow, and The Medium's few interesting twists (near the end of the game) feel unearned.

It's unfortunate that The Medium's narrative doesn't shine, because a solid story may have pulled me through its uninspired gameplay. As Marianne communes with the dead, she is occasionally tasked with solving simple puzzles, such as rerouting the power to a car lift or finding the missing pieces to a broken mirror. Sadly, only a small handful of these puzzles ask the player to look for clever solutions. For example, I enjoyed paying attention to clues in my environment to decipher the passcode for a locked door, but most of the time I felt like I was completing grunt work, hauling random items from one end of the environment to the other so I could place them back where they obviously belong.

The Medium's one unique element comes from how it handles the spirit realm. At designated points in the story, Marianne inhabits both the real world and the spirit world at the same time. During these sequences, the screen splits in half to show Marianne's location in each realm. A room that is blocked off in the real world might be open in the spirit realm, which encourages you to carefully explore both realities and find a way forward. This is a neat idea, and I enjoyed manipulating objects in one realm to affect the other. But even in the spirit realm, most puzzles boil down to returning objects to their proper place. The spirit realm is also incredibly drab, and its overtly grotesque design diminished my enthusiasm for crossing realities. I love good, creepy atmosphere, but The Medium's environments are formed of human-like skin, not terror-inducing locales.

Like a lot of modern horror games, The Medium forgoes traditional combat mechanics in an effort to amplify the scares – but this doesn't do enough to turn up the tension. The Medium sets the stage for several chilling moments, but often fails to deliver. For example, Marianne occasionally encounters a powerful beast that forces her to either run or hide. These moments seem thrilling at first, but the monster is so easy to evade that it quickly stops feeling like a threat. The stealth sequences are particularly disappointing because they are so linear that there is never any question on where you need to hide; these moments are more like trials in patience as you wait for the monster to move on so you can creep forward to the next hidey-hole.

Some of the best horror games of the last decade have offered combat-free frights. After all, abandoned buildings are scarier when you can't push back against the shadows. However, The Medium's lack of combat highlights the challenge of letting atmosphere and puzzles carry a horror experience. The idea of exploring split realities is neat, but Bloober Team needed another gameplay hook to hang its hat on, because this horror show is a bit shallow. » **Ben Reeves**

Cyber Shadow

A war of attrition

Style Action **Publisher** Yacht Club Games **Developer** Mechanical Head Studios **Release** January 26 **Rating** E

7.5

PS5 • PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Concept
Hack and slash your way through a dystopian future ruled by evil robots to rescue your master and free your clan

» Graphics
The 8-bit presentation looks good, and the cutscenes successfully nail the classic Ninja Gaiden style

» Sound
Most of the chiptune soundtrack is serviceable but uninspired, though a couple of tracks evoke a feeling of struggle and triumph

» Playability
The basic controls feel mostly fine, but it takes too long to get simple, fun maneuvers like dashing and wall-jumping

» Entertainment
Equal parts fun and infuriating, Cyber Shadow isn't for the weak of heart

» Replay Value
Moderate

Cyber Shadow will kick your butt. Make no bones about it, this retro-inspired action title will chew you up and spit you out, much like the classic Ninja Gaiden series that inspired it. As in the NES staple, the fun comes in trying to overcome that steep challenge. Unfortunately, Cyber Shadow doesn't back up its challenge with gameplay and progression that feels consistently fun or rewarding.

For better or worse, Cyber Shadow nails the era it tries to evoke thanks to a faithful 8-bit presentation, stylish animated cutscenes, and demanding difficulty. Armed with a trusty katana, you test your reflexes by slicing through a robot apocalypse in order to free your ninja brethren and rescue your master. Stages are devilishly designed, with seemingly mean-spirited hazards placed exactly where you need to go (or where you land when you slip up), and may as well be giant, pixelated middle fingers. Making that crucial leap only to be hit by a stray laser and knocked back into the pit you just avoided is nothing short of maddening, and Cyber Shadow is filled to the brim with such moments. It doesn't help that checkpoints are sparse, meaning you must replay long, arduous stretches to reach a new spot to exhale.

Players can ease their journey by purchasing permanent perks for individual checkpoints. These perks include basic health/mana regeneration, but you can also get one of many tools, like a shield, turret, or my favorite: the yo-yo-like swag blade. A few tools, like the slow-firing turret, feel impotent and not worth the money, but others can mean the difference between failure and success. While these upgrades are technically optional, some sections feel nigh impossible without them, and it's easy to find yourself with an empty wallet and no way to purchase help. In some cases, you may have to grind to proceed, but that's neither fun nor entirely feasible, since some areas don't have enough enemies or breakable objects to quickly gather the necessary funds.

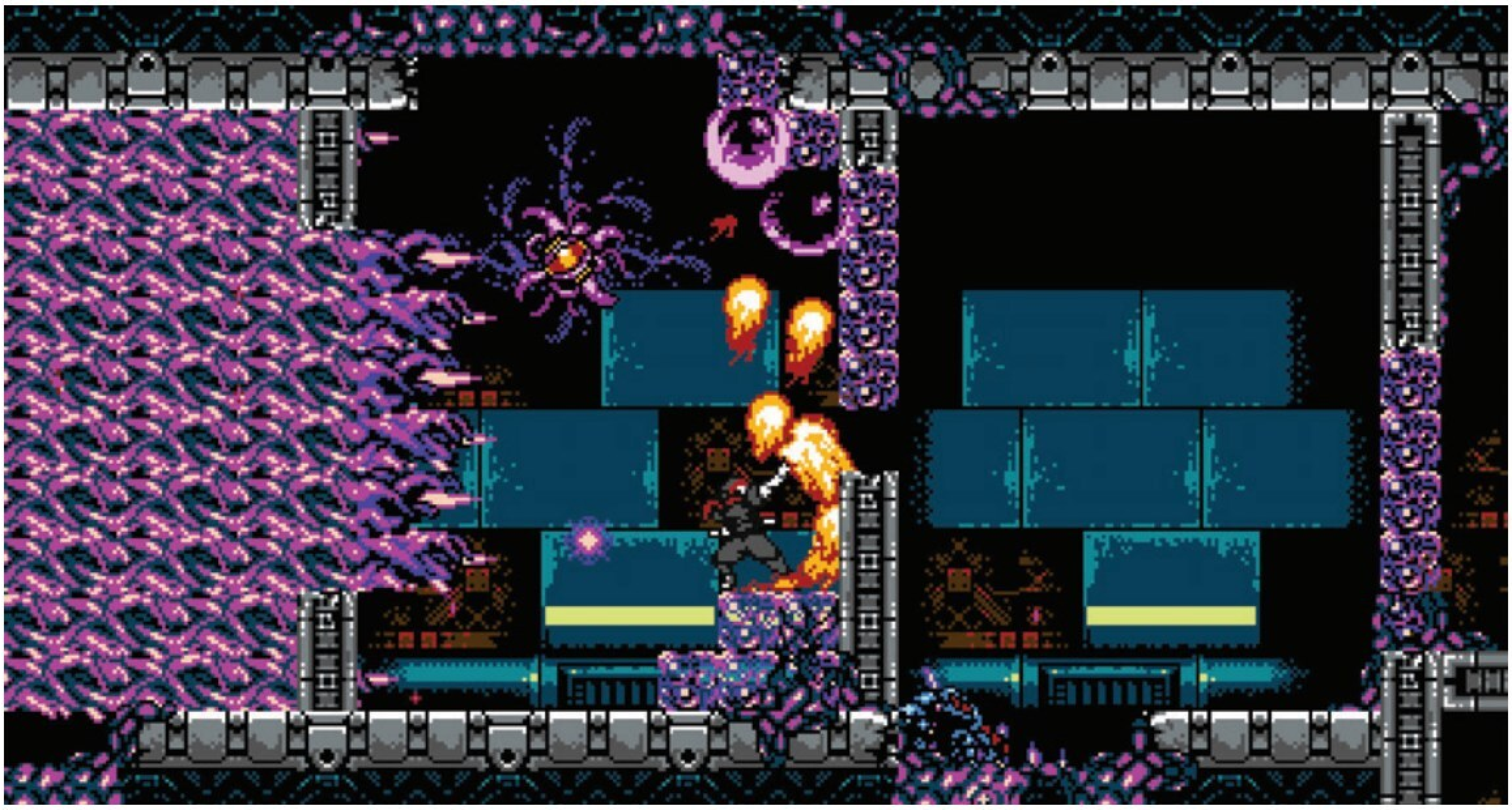
Cyber Shadow starts simple, with only a jump and attack to players' names. That limited arsenal falls flat once the nostalgia wears off (assuming you have fond memories of games of this ilk). Your repertoire eventually expands, but the game takes too long doling out abilities that make basic traversal more exciting, such as a wall-climb or sprint. Hitting a running jump and air-dashing through a foe feels great once you learn to do so, but Cyber Shadow demands players stick it out for seven of the game's ten stages to get there. Requiring players to endure two-thirds of a punishing game just to obtain skills that belong in every ninja's starter kit does not feel satisfying.

The default control scheme also makes executing certain actions tough. Most abilities are mapped to a cardinal direction on the d-pad/analog stick plus the attack button. This setup works decently enough, but during the frantic platforming segments, it's easy to trigger the wrong ability, like transitioning from an air-dash to a shuriken throw. Given how often you need to change course in a split second, having the d-pad carry so many functions eventually feels cumbersome. Basic actions and sprinting can be remapped (I highly recommend moving sprint to the right shoulder triggers) but actual abilities can't. That's disappointing, since hitting two buttons to launch shurikens feels clunky compared to what a single face button would have accomplished.

When things do click, Cyber Shadow provides solid entertainment. The action becomes more fluid and engaging once you obtain all the abilities. The boss fights are my favorite encounters; they bring the pain but are exciting and feel mostly fair (save for a tedious water battle against a mechanical dragon). There's also decent gameplay variety, including a motorcycle-chase sequence and digitized battles inside of computer terminals.

Even with such diversions, Cyber Shadow doesn't do much that's surprising, and can sometimes be too tough for its own good. However, those with plenty of patience and an appetite for pain will find fun in this modern throwback. However, be aware that the price of admission may be your sanity, and that's a high price to pay for this competent-but-flawed war of attrition.

» **Marcus Stewart**



Call Of The Sea

A puzzling island escape

8.5

Style Adventure **Publisher** Raw Fury **Developer** Out of the Blue Games **Release** December 8, 2020 **Rating** E

Xbox Series X/S
Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Travel to an exotic island during the 1930s to find your missing husband and uncover the cause of your mysterious disease

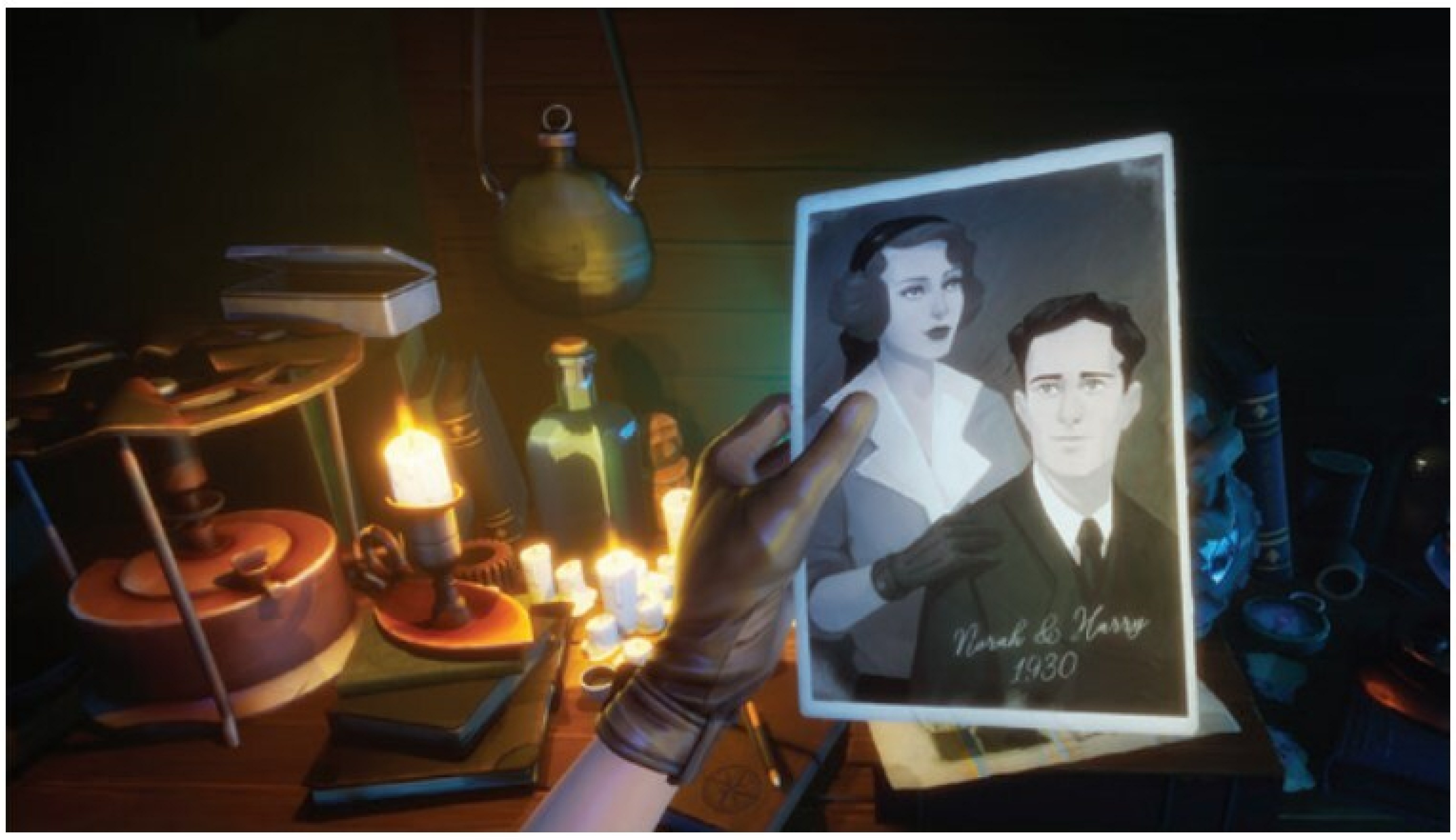
» Graphics
The scenic island, from its lush jungles to its haunting ruins, evokes feelings of both awe and trepidation

» Sound
Norah's determination and fear comes through in Cissy Jones' voice performance, and the soundtrack hits at the right moments to elicit feelings of success and suspense

» Playability
The complex puzzle-solving makes the most of the game's otherwise simple interactions to make sure your brain works hard, not your hands

» Entertainment
Clever puzzles and an engaging narrative make Call of the Sea a voyage worth taking

» Replay Value
Moderate



Norah knows something is amiss the moment she steps foot on the island. Despite its inviting beauty, an eerie vibe permeates the air. After all, this is the same place that may have claimed the life of her husband, Harry, who never returned from an expedition here to find a cure for Norah's mysterious illness. This time, though, it's up to Norah to rescue him. Call of the Sea is the wonderful debut title by Out of the Blue Games and blends a tantalizing mystery that's matched by equally engaging puzzle-solving and exploration.

Call of the Sea's beautiful presentation lured me from the get-go. From the lush jungles to jaw-dropping shipwrecks, this is a beautiful game, and many scenes would look right at home on a postcard. The ancient ruins also wowed me in their haunting beauty and during moments when seemingly impossible machinery comes to life.

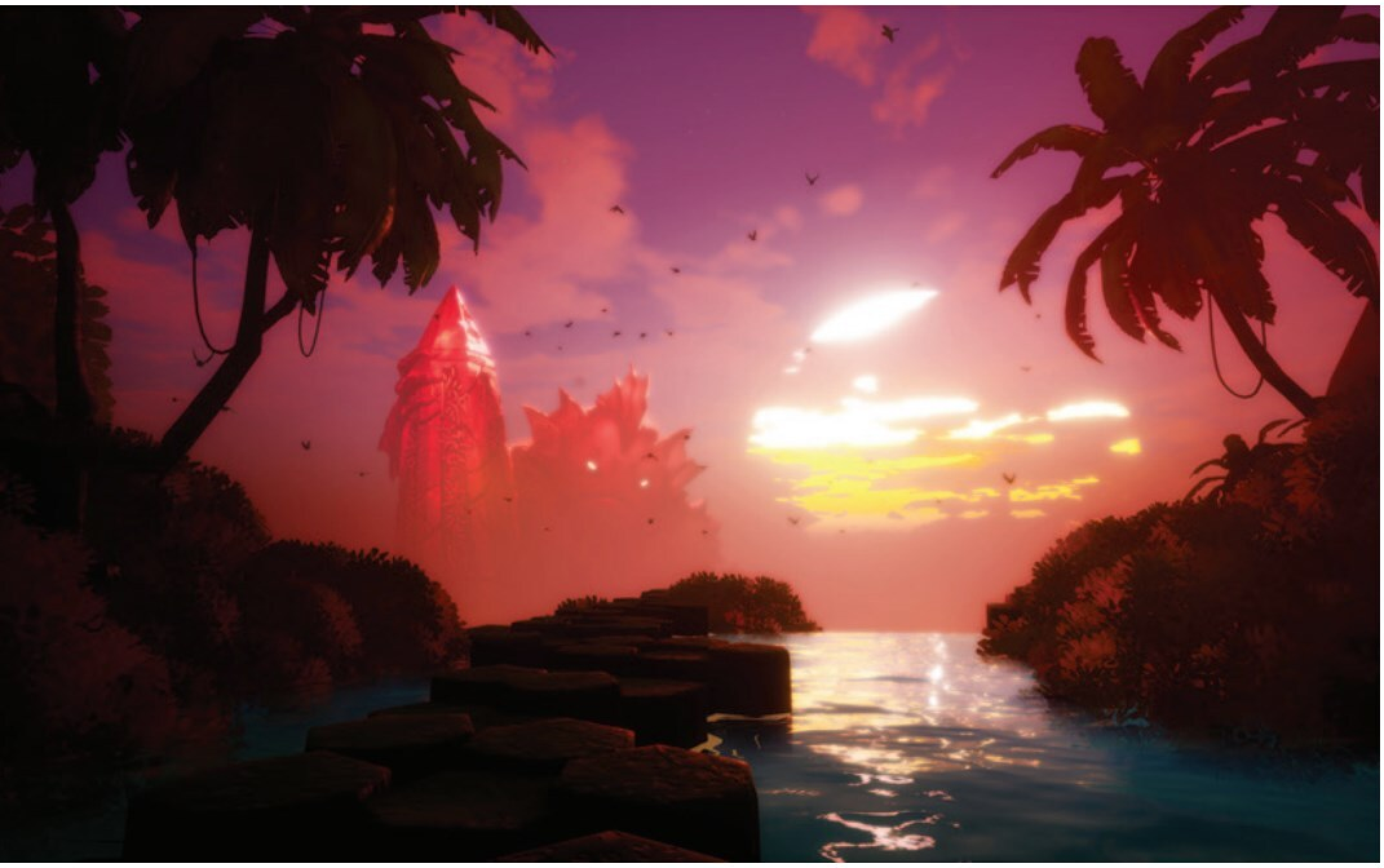
Norah is more Nancy Drew than Lara Croft, so puzzles take precedence over combat, and they succeed with clever design and strong variety. What I love most is how Call of the Sea makes you feel like both an observant detective and a problem-solving genius. It takes advantage of its alluring beauty by encouraging players to look at everything around them to spot clues and connect dots. An ancient mural or a hastily drawn sketch can often be the difference between a quick solution and more prolonged head-scratching. Inspecting curious objects and notes is part of the fun, and nothing is ever too hidden. I always found everything I needed if I was reasonably thorough in my searches. Furthermore, Norah jots down important info in her journal, which alleviates much of the pressure in terms of committing clues to memory.

Puzzles come in many cool shapes and sizes; they can be as simple as rotating totem poles to match a specific pattern, or as elaborate as deciphering a dead language. One of the largest and most impressive challenges tasked me with discovering the correct melody to play on a giant, ancient organ. Smaller puzzles often feed into larger ones to create a cohesive whole, and it's fun to see how riddles thematically build upon each other. Call of the Sea regularly surprised me with its puzzle design, and I always looked forward to seeing what was next.

The challenges grow more complicated the deeper Norah penetrates the island. Most puzzles are reasonably tough, but a couple feel too obtuse. One particularly maddening example involves using symbols to operate a series of locks to open a door. It's a clever idea on paper, but after exhausting the area of all of its notes and visual hints, it felt like the game still wasn't clearly communicating a key step – like I was missing a crucial piece to a cool jigsaw puzzle. I eventually just resorted to a walkthrough, and I'm still not sure how the answer makes sense.

When the going got tough, however, the strong narrative propelled me forward. I loved picking up notes with more details about Harry's expedition and further insight into Norah's illness. The story takes some dark and surprising turns that culminate in a surprising and mostly satisfying conclusion. With all the focus on ancient tribes, mysticism, and death, the endearing bond between Norah and Harry manages to shine through even when Norah is the only one providing insight.

Call of the Sea kept me hooked from beginning to end, making it a voyage worth embarking on. I could have gotten lost on that island and solved puzzles for double of its actual running time (about six hours), but the game spends as much time as it needs to spin its tale and test your noggin. This is one island worth getting marooned on. » **Marcus Stewart**



Super Meat Boy Forever

Hardcore hurdling

Style 1-Player Platformer **Publisher** Team Meat **Developer** Team Meat **Release** December 23, 2020 **Rating** T

8

Switch • PC

» **Concept**
The evil Dr. Fetus kidnapped Meat Boy's kid, so our blood-soaked hero must platform through a series of deadly obstacles and rescue his whippersnapper

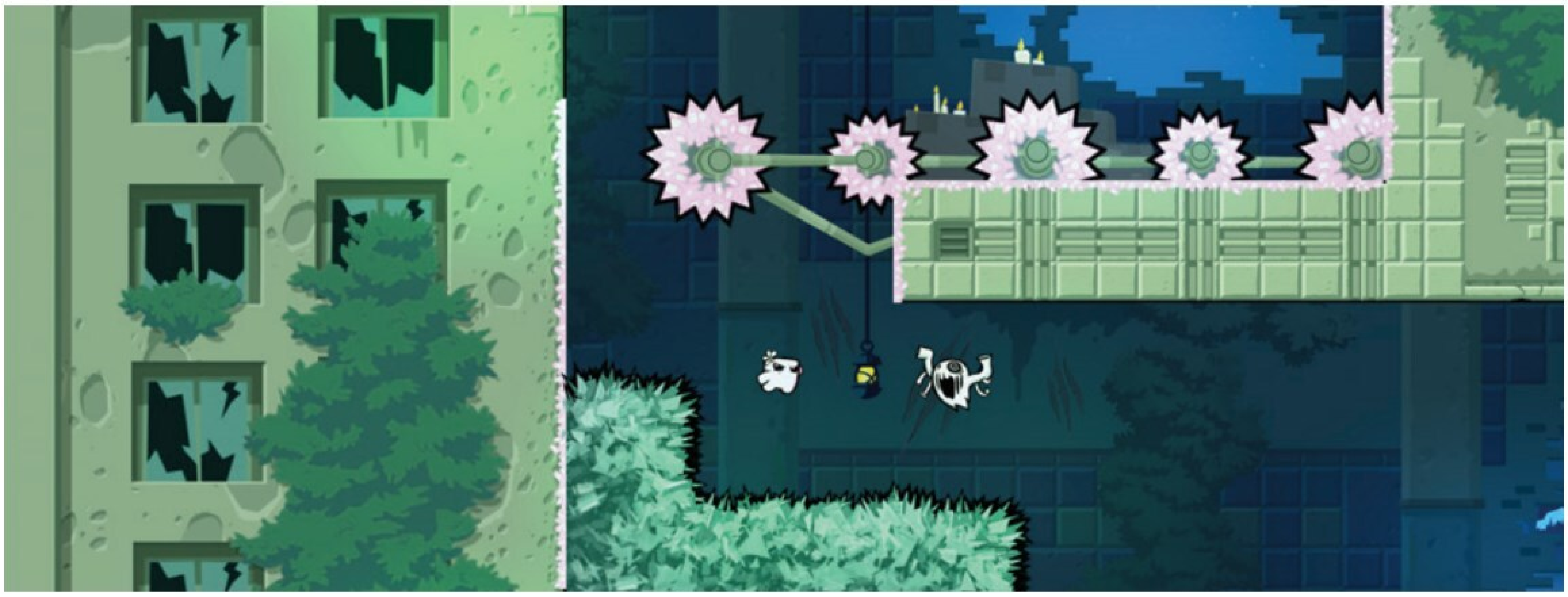
» **Graphics**
Simple and crisp, Super Meat Boy's art design is zany and gross – but in a fun way

» **Sound**
This metal soundtrack isn't nearly as good as the original's chiptune beats, but it gets the job done

» **Playability**
Forever's autorun functionality places the focus on a series of exceedingly challenging platforming sequences, but thankfully the jumping around feels great

» **Entertainment**
Like the original, Super Meat Boy Forever will test your resolve, but it's easy to jump back into the action, and the thrill of success is worth the endurance

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high



The original Super Meat Boy was released a decade ago into what almost feels like a different industry. Team Meat's hardcore platformer was at the forefront of the modern indie-game renaissance; at the time indie games were an afterthought for many, but games like Super Meat Boy showed that even small teams of dedicated developers could make a big mark on the gaming landscape. A few years later, Team Meat announced the followup Super Meat Boy Forever, a pseudo-sequel that would take Meat Boy into the world of autorunners. When that game was announced, I remember wondering if Team Meat could distill Meat Boy's pixel-perfect platforming into a game where you only had one input? I also wondered if Forever had any chance of leaving the same kind of cultural mark on the industry as its forerunner? The answers, of course, were "Surprisingly yes," and "No chance in hell."

As mentioned above, Super Meat Boy Forever is an autorunner, which means that Meat Boy takes off running the second you press start, and you can't control the direction of his movements or his speed. This might sound like it would simplify the action and neuter Meat Boy's difficulty, but that isn't the case. While Forever is technically a simple game, it's far from easy. Given Super Meat Boy Forever's streamlined action, Team Meat has put extra focus on precision platforming, setting up a series of harrowing obstacle courses that force you to carefully time your jumps. There were a few times I wished I had a little more control over Meat Boy, but, for the most part, I quickly forgot about his limitations once I was sliding under buzzsaws and bounding up walls.

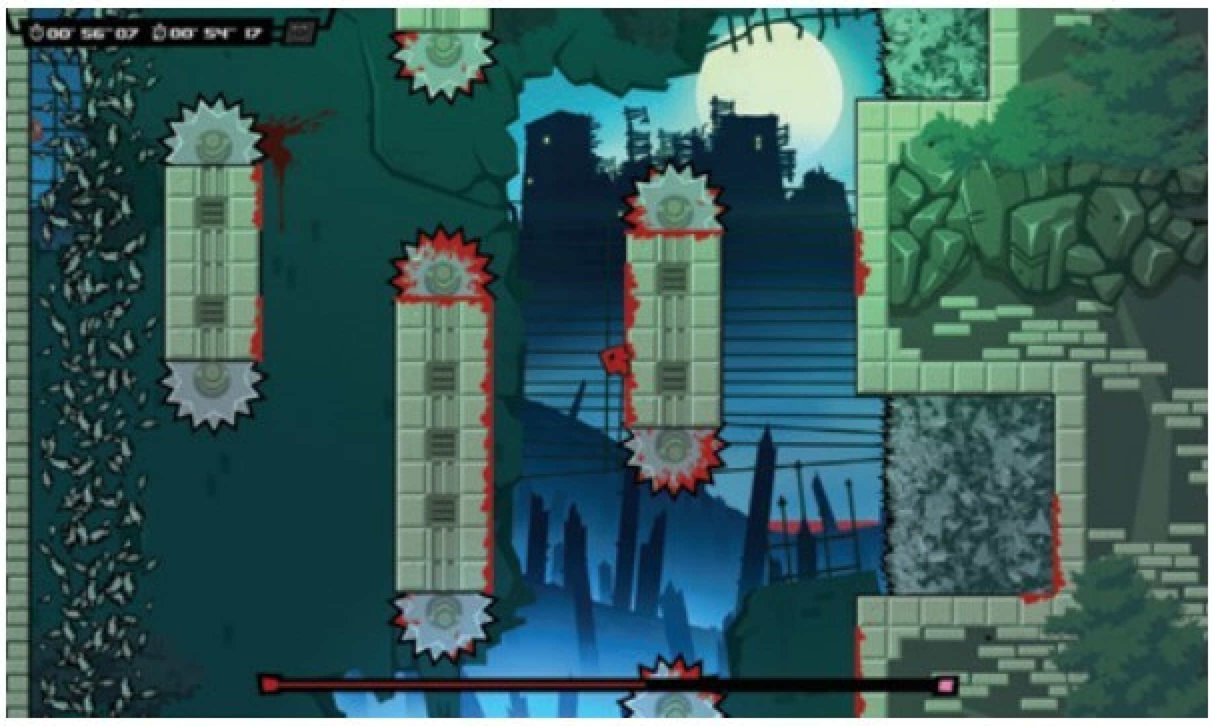
This Meat Boy is called Forever because its levels are procedurally generated, meaning you can theoretically play the game endlessly. Procedurally generated games often lack that hand-crafted feel, but Super Meat Boy Forever's levels flow seamlessly together in ways that usually feel natural. Each level in Forever is composed of level fragments taken from a pool of over 7,000 bite-sized platforming sections, which means that every player will have their own unique experience with the game. After I finished one playthrough, I generated a new set of levels and was surprised by how different the experience felt.

Even without procedural generation, Meat Boy Forever's action evolves as you progress. In one set of levels, I dashed through rainstorms of falling glass, and in another I used Meat Boy's dash punch to move blocks across the screen, creating new platforms. I particularly enjoyed the levels featuring pickups allowing Meat Boy to teleport through walls. Each new set of levels emphasize a new set of obstacles, which continually kept me on my toes. I was genuinely surprised by how fresh the action felt throughout the entire game, and Forever was throwing new mechanics at me up to the end.

By and large, Super Meat Boy Forever's controls are superb, but my one complaint has to do with Meat Boy's new ability to punch enemies. When you press the jump button twice, Meat Boy dashes forward and slams his oversized fist into any helpless enemy standing in his way. These critters don't pose much of a threat and usually serve to help Meat Boy cross large gaps; Meat Boy's punch resets after punching an enemy, meaning he can stay airborne as long as his fist is flying. This mechanic is a lot of fun and I appreciated having a few enemies to whack around. Unfortunately, Meat Boy's jump and punch are tied to the same button, so there were several times where I moved to hit the jump button as I touched the ground only to end up throwing a punch off the side of a cliff. This kind of dual input wouldn't be a problem in a lot of games, but given the precise timing needed to complete many of Super Meat Boy Forever's challenges, it would have been nice to have punch and jump on separate inputs.

Super Meat Boy Forever's simplified controls produce a bit of frustration, but this is a game that rewards pushing through the pain for the thrill that comes with completing a harrowing platforming sequence. My thumb grew numb over the course of the game, but that didn't stop me from wanting to play more. In fact, on some levels, I died over a hundred times, but I rarely cared because Super Meat Boy Forever's respawns are mercifully quick, its checkpoints are short, and its bite-sized platforming sequences are a total rush.

» Ben Reeves



8 Alba: A Wildlife Adventure

Platform PC • iOS **Release** December 11 **Rating** 4+

Alba: A Wildlife Adventure is a wonderfully charming experience from Ustwo, the team behind the Monument Valley series. Instead of challenging players with M.C. Escher-style puzzles, it mellows them out with a relaxing, feel-good experience designed to promote conservation in an entertaining manner.
– Marcus Stewart

8 Gears 5: Hivebusters

Platform Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC **Release** December 15 **Rating** M

The troubled open-world exploration that was introduced in Gears 5 is nowhere to be found, and neither are Kait Diaz or the Fenix Family. We instead see Gears doing what it does best: mulching Locust Horde flesh.
– Andrew Reiner

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5.5 Cyberpunk 2077

Platform PS4 • Xbox One
Release December 10 **Rating** M

Cyberpunk 2077 wasn't optimized for last-gen consoles, and no amount of interesting side activities can remedy that. On PC, the world lives up to its title as the "City of Dreams." For Xbox One and PlayStation 4 players, however, their time in Night City is likely to be a nightmare. – Jason Guisao

8.5 Ratropolis

Platform PC **Release** December 22
Rating NR

In Ratropolis, Cassel Games successfully integrates card construction with city-building and defense to create a charming strategy mix. The resulting amalgamation is a satisfying soiree of rodents, robots, and giant ducks that keeps you coming back game after game. – Daniel Tack

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10 THINGS YOU PROBABLY DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT MASS EFFECT

With the Mass Effect Trilogy remaster on the horizon, we figured now was the perfect time to drop some lesser-known facts regarding a galaxy that gifted us with purpose, family, and everybody's favorite Turian.

by Liana Ruppert

1 In the book *Mass Effect: Revelation*, written by Drew Karpyshyn, it's confirmed that blondes are almost completely extinct in the Mass Effect universe because of their recessive-trait nature.

2 Think you were sad when your Commander Shepard died (we're ignoring the breath for argument's sake here)? Well, BioWare's first ending was much darker. The original idea behind the trilogy was to have the entire crew die a hero's death, perishing alongside Shepard during the final showdown with the Reapers.

3 Garrus is the best whether he is your bro or your go-to love interest, but that wasn't always the case. Fans loved the renegade Turian so much in the first game, where he wasn't romanceable, that they created tons of fan fiction and fan art. The fan-created universe of Vakarian love was so good that it made BioWare rethink him as a potential sweetie for FemShep.

4 Aria has a daughter. Yup, the "I am Omega" persona is a centuries-old criminal genius, but somewhere along the way she added "mother" to her résumé. This fun fact was revealed in Karpyshyn's *Mass Effect: Retribution*, with Aria's offspring being named Liselle. Without spoiling Liselle's storyline, she actually has a massive role in the Cerberus narrative arc regarding the epic Omega takeover.

5 The faceoff against the Reapers in Mass Effect 3 was brutal, but that final fight wasn't the original plan for the franchise's big bad. Originally, BioWare slated the Illusive Man to be the big villain, but the studio eventually shifted away from that idea because his final confrontation felt too much like Saren's in the first game.

6 Vorcha sound pretty annoying, right? Did you know that every Vorcha in Mass Effect is voiced by Commander Shepard? At least if you go MaleShep, because Mark Meer is the vicious disjointed voice heard all over Omega.

7 Saren is first introduced to Sovereign in the book *Revelation*, where he infiltrates a secret A.I. project that the Alliance tries to hide from the rest of the galaxy. The facility housed a Reaper-created artifact, thus beginning Saren's indoctrination and eventual deal with Sovereign itself.

8 We were first introduced to James Vega in the animated movie *Mass Effect: Paragon Lost* before he became a squadmate in the third game. We see him encounter the Collectors for the first time in the human colony Fehl Prime, where he also learns what it means to sacrifice everything for the mission.

9 If a Vorcha and an Asari mate, their child will automatically be allergic to all dairy products. The more you know!

10 "Canon" Commander Shepard was originally a woman until BioWare eventually decided to focus on a male protagonist instead. While players could always choose between a John or Jane Shepard, the marketing was purely MaleShep-driven until the third game.

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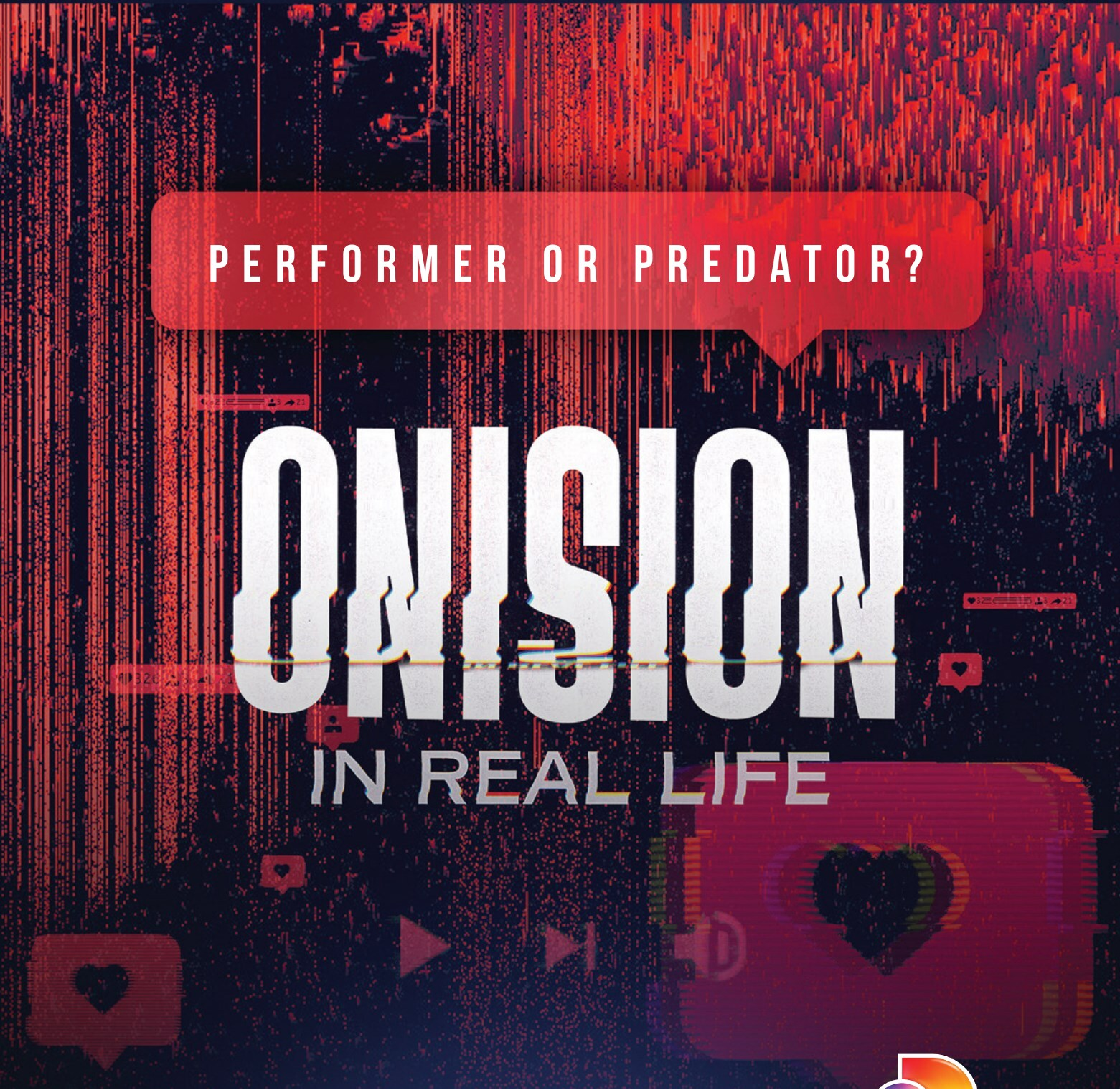

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